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THE BLACK HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET

ALSO BY
J. S. FLETCHER

I'D VENTURE ALL FOR THEE!
HARDICAN'S HOLLOW
THE HARVEST MOON
DANIEL QUAYNE
MARCHESTER ROYAL
THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL
THE MILL OF MANY WINDOWS
THE SECRET OF THE BARBICAN
THE HEAVEN KISSED HILL
THE COPPER BOX
THE VALLEY OF HEADSTRONG MEN

THE BLACK HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET

BY
J. S. FLETCHER



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THE BLACK HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET

CHAPTER I

ON EPSOM DOWNS

AS THE field of eighteen came flashing into view round the slope of Tattenham Corner, Richard Goulburn held his breath and strained his eyes. From his place in one of the cheaper stands on the top side of the course he saw little more than a confusion of colour. Most of the animals struggling for victory seemed to him to be browns or chestnuts; being quite inexperienced in anything relating to racing matters, he wondered in a vague sort of fashion how it was that none of them was grey or white. But he was much more concerned just then in endeavouring to pick out from the various colours of the jockeys—the turquoise-blue, the purples, the blue and whites, the whites, the black and reds, the golds, the maroons—a certain white jacket with violet sleeves, over which, as a quick nervous glance at his card told him, there would be a red cap.

“Can you see where Mountain Apple is?” he timidly inquired of a very sporting-looking gentleman at his elbow who, unlike himself, was provided with a pair of

field-glasses, and was diligently following the progress of the oncoming rush. "Is he anywhere in——"

The gentleman with the field-glasses snapped out a reply without deigning to look at his questioner.

"Can't yer see for yerself?" he said. "He's bloomin' well in front—that's where he is."

"And bloomin' well goin' to win, if you arsk me!" exclaimed another sporting gentleman in close proximity. "Bli' me! Look how he's goin'! And where's Norman III., I'd like to know—yah!"

"Out of it, my boy, out of it!" said the gentleman with the field-glasses. "Out of it—that's where he is, and no error. Here y'are! Mountain Apple wins!"

Goulburn shouted as loudly as any of them as the red cap surmounting the white and violet flashed past at the head of a swirling mass of colour. It seemed to him that all the world had suddenly gone mad and was yelling "Mountain Apple!" at the top of its voice. A sudden magnificent delirium of gladness seized him, and he only stopped shouting to begin laughing.

The man who wanted to know where Norman III. had got to turned a gloomy face upon him and scowled scoffingly.

"Don't you laugh too soon, my lad!" he said. "It's not over yet. I've seen some good 'uns go down at the end."

"It was well in front here, anyway," retorted Goulburn, with the hauteur of one-and-twenty. "And winning easily, too."

"Oh, was it?" said the other, imitating Goulburn's

intonation. "Well, I'll lay yer lordship half a quid it hasn't."

The gentleman with the field-glasses suddenly closed them with a snap. "And you'd be right," he said decisively. "It's a bloomin' outsider that's won, that's what it is. Where's yer shouting now?"

A strange silence had fallen over the seething, struggling, perspiring crowd which, but a moment before, had been straining its lungs to their utmost. There was nothing to show that a popular favourite had passed the post first—men were already beginning to realise, with a species of electric sense only felt on racecourses, that the unexpected had happened.

"The numbers are going up," said somebody.

The man with the field-glasses adjusted them to his eyes once more and gazed down the course.

"Sixteen. Nine. Three," he read out staccato fashion. "Told yer it was an outsider. Signorinetta—that's it. Hundred to one chance."

"You're sure it isn't number six instead of sixteen?" asked Goulburn timidly.

The man looked at him for the first time, and saw the lad's white face and anxious eyes. And without a word he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously and began to elbow his way through the people about him.

How Richard Goulburn got off the stand he could never remember. Something seemed to crack in his brain; something seemed to seize on his heart; something seemed to make him feel queer in the region of

his stomach. Without knowing how he got there, he found himself standing in a comparatively lonely part of the Downs, realising that the Derby of 1908 was over and that he had lost—lost more than the losing owners had lost.

Now, there are all sorts of ways in which one may feel about losing the Derby. If you are a very wealthy personage and love horse-racing for its own sake, and wisely abstain from betting on it, your chief sadness in losing the race, as owner, is that you have not won the Blue Ribbon of the Turf. If you are a regular backer of horses, making a profession of the most doubtful calling in the world, you will be disappointed when, after all your care and study of handbooks and newspapers, your horse comes in a bad third or a worse eighth. If you are a poor man, knowing very well that you cannot afford to stake even a sovereign on a horse, and you do so and lose, that sovereign will be commensurate with the amount of the odds which you got. It will make it all the worse in the last case if you merely got two to one on the favourite (which was nowhere), while your neighbour had a hundred to one on some unknown beast—which won easily. You will sigh, "Oh—if I had but known what was going to win!"—but quite uselessly, for there is no more useless form of regret than that of being sorry after the event is over. It is almost as useless—if not quite as much so—as moralising on the foolishness of betting at all.

But this is what Richard Goulburn—as was, after all, not unnatural, seeing that he was very young and by

no means a philosopher—exactly did now that the excitement was over and he had time to think. He flung himself down on the ground near an almond-scented clump of brilliantly coloured gorse, and smote his fists together.

“What a fool I’ve been!” he groaned. “What a fool! And what shall I do now?”

That, of course, is what all young men placed in the same predicament would say. And his next remark—with the exception of the proper name included in it—is one that has been voiced more times than once by more young men than one would like to reckon the number of.

“I wish I’d never taken Bassett’s advice! And yet he said Mountain Apple was a certainty—a dead certainty. I wish I’d never known Bassett.”

Then he groaned again, and rising from his recumbent position, began to pace up and down the quiet patch of ground amongst the gorse brakes into which he had accidentally strayed. He was walking to and fro with bent head and hands clasping and unclasping themselves behind his back when he suddenly heard himself addressed by what was without doubt the voice of a young woman.

“I am afraid you are in great trouble!”

Goulburn started, turned, and stared about him, the colour rising to his cheek at the thought that he had been observed. He had believed himself to be alone; now, looking round his retreat, he saw a girl of something about his own age, who, shaded by a scarlet

sunshade, sat in a sort of nest beneath the gorse. He perceived at once that she was a girl of refinement, and—judging from her dress and appearance—of some position. As to her looks, good or bad, he formed a hasty general impression of a mass of chestnut-hued hair under a large picture hat, of a pair of large brown eyes, of a pretty face, and of an expression which was just then somewhat anxious.

Goulburn, himself the descendant of good stock, instinctively uncovered his head. He was conscious that he began to blush.

"I—I didn't know that any one was there," he said lamely. "I thought I was alone."

"But you are in trouble," she said, returning to her first remark with true feminine persistency.

Goulburn made a feeble attempt to smile, and succeeded in making a wry face.

"Yes," he answered, "I'm pretty badly hit."

"You've lost your money in betting?"

He nodded his head.

"Could you afford to lose it?" she asked, looking at him with interest.

"No!" he replied promptly.

"Then why did you risk it?" she inquired.

"Because I wanted to make it much more, and believed firmly that I should win," he replied.

The girl inspected him narrowly. He was a straight, clean-limbed young man, open of face, bright of eye, and with a certain simple candour about him that appealed more than his generally handsome appearance

and good looks. His flannel suit and straw hat were in the best and quietest taste; he spoke and moved like a gentleman. She began to be interested in him.

"Will it really make very much difference?" she asked. "I mean to say—you aren't ruined and going to blow your brains out, or anything of that sort, are you? Because you—well, you don't look what one usually calls poor, you know."

Goulburn laughed.

"Ah, but I am!" he replied. "Really, I am. I'm only a clerk with a very modest salary. That's why I ought not to have been so foolish as to risk any money on a horse-race. And——"

His face suddenly darkened, and, as if some new thought had struck him, he lifted his hat in silence and was about to move off when she stopped him with a gesture.

"No," she said. "I wish you wouldn't go. I'm sure you are in greater trouble than you've said—and—well, when one sees anybody in trouble one naturally feels that one would like to help them as far as one can. Don't you think so?"

Goulburn was looking at her very steadily.

"I don't think everybody does," he said slowly. "I haven't met many people who did. But then my life's been spent amongst men who care nothing for anything but themselves and money-making. No—I don't know anybody who'd care to hear a trouble of mine—most people I know would say they'd no time to listen. Certainly, there's Chris Aspinall—he would."

"And who is he?" she asked.

"Oh, a fellow-clerk, and my best friend. But he's as poor as I am."

She looked at him steadily for a while, and then pointed to the bank on which she sat with a gesture in which there was something like authority.

"I'd be glad if you'd sit down there and tell me all about it," she said. "I would like to know. And I'm absolutely sincere in wanting to know. Don't throw away sympathy when it's shown to you."

Goulburn hesitated a moment or two; then, with a sudden glance at the girl, which in reality, and as she saw, conveyed a recognition of his belief in her, he sat down in the place she indicated.

"Well, it's this way," he said, "though I'm an awful duffer at telling a story consecutively or clearly. You see, I not only lost my own money, but some money which, in strict truth, was not really mine."

He saw a sudden flush of colour come into her cheeks, and his own flushed hotly.

"Oh," he said, "don't think that I—stole it or got it in any dishonest way. I believe—yes, I'm sure—that legally the money really is mine; but, you see, I've always looked upon it as being somebody else's. I'm afraid this is very muddling—anyway, you see, my father was a poor country clergyman—very poor indeed. When he died a few years ago—my mother had then been dead several years—we did not expect a penny, and we were quite surprised to find that he had left a little piece of landed property—a small farm,

in fact—which, it turned out, had been in his family for some generations, and was entailed. I don't know how it was that he never spoke to me of it—perhaps he meant to and had no chance, for he died suddenly. Well, of course it came to me, being the eldest and only son, and the income from it—forty pounds a year—is paid to me. But from the first I have always considered one-half of that as my sister's."

The listener nodded comprehensively.

"I see," she said. "And how old is your sister?"

"She is twenty-two, and I am twenty-four," he replied, in a grave fashion which suggested to his hearer that he thought himself very old and wise. "She is a governess in South Kensington. But, you know, governesses are not well paid, and the twenty pounds a year from the little farm is very useful. She always has a good holiday with it. And that is why I am so angry with myself, because——"

He paused and turned his face away and was silent.

"Yes?" said the girl encouragingly.

"Because I put her money—the twenty pounds—and mine on Mountain Apple for the Derby—win or place—and he was fourth."

The girl fingered her parasol and seemed to reflect.

"Was it with her consent?" she asked, after a short silence.

"No," he replied frankly. "She knew nothing about it. You see, I wanted to give her such a splendid surprise. If I could explain——"

"Yes," she said, "explain—tell me everything."

Goulburn had broken off a sprig of gorse and was unconsciously stripping it of its bloom. He seemed to be thinking of two things at once, and the girl noticed that when he spoke of his sister his face grew soft, even to the point of wistfulness.

"Well," he continued at last, "I did want to give her a real surprise. She's very fond of travel, you know, my sister—her name's Maisie—and she's talked for a long time of how she'd like to go to Sweden and Norway and Denmark during her summer holidays—she has nearly two months' liberty. And I've wondered how I could make some money for her. And one day last week I was talking to a chap in our office—chap named Bassett, who knows everything—regular sharp man of the world—and I asked him if he thought I could make a bit on the Stock Exchange with the forty pounds. Then he said that one could do much better and with less risk on the turf, and strongly advised me to have it all on Mountain Apple—both ways—and then I shouldn't lose anything in any way, because he said it was a perfectly absolute certainty that if it didn't win outright it was bound to be in the first three. And you know everybody in the office knows Bassett to be a real sportsman—he's gone hunting, and he goes to see prize-fights—and so I believed him. Indeed, I thought it was quite a favour to get such a tip from him."

He paused and looked at her somewhat shyly, as a child might have done.

"Do you think I'm a big fool?" he said.

The girl laughed.

"I think you are a refreshingly innocent young man," she answered. "You said you were a clerk—that's something in the city, isn't it? What are you in—sugar, jute, wheat, coal, or what?"

"Tea," he answered. "I'm with Pepperall & Tardrew, in Mincing Lane. A very old firm—and not too strict."

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment.

"I'm glad I met you," she said. "You're much more interesting than the racing. After two races I couldn't sit on a drag in the blazing sunshine any longer, and I ran away on my own account, and found this little oasis—into which you came 'like one distraught,' as some poet or other remarks."

"I am glad to have afforded you amusement," he replied, with some touch of hauteur.

"Now, don't get up to run away," she said. "You mayn't think it, but I'm one of those persons who like to have their own way, and I've some more to say to you. So sit still—unless you think I am too insistent on your obedience, or wasteful of your time."

"No," he answered. "You have been very kind in sympathising——"

"How do you know I sympathise with you?" she said, with a somewhat roguish twinkle of her eyes. "I never said I did."

"No," he answered, "but—you listened to me."

She nodded her head as if in approval of the answer.

"That's discerning of you," she said. "I like discernment—especially in young men who seem to need

it. Well, listen: here's my judgment on the matter. First, I think you were very foolish to stake your money on such an uncertain thing as horse-racing, and in taking Mr. Bassett's advice. If Mr. Bassett knows so much about horse-racing, why hasn't Mr. Bassett made a fortune for himself?"

"Well, but surely——" began Goulburn.

She shook a dainty finger at him.

"Don't interrupt," she commanded. "Because you know very well that I'm right, and so you should listen in silence. Then I think you were very wrong in using the money intended for your sister. Because, you see, however good your intentions were in respect to making more of it, you've lost it."

Goulburn nodded his head miserably.

"Yes!" he said bitterly. "That's just the worst of it. It doesn't matter how you condemn me—you can't make me feel worse about myself than I do."

"Well, I'm not condemning you. I've seen and know of a good many things done in what some men call business that were a million times wickeder than your little bit of thoughtlessness. If you take somebody else's money without their leave, and speculate with it, and prove successful, and share the profits with them handsomely, that's all right every time; if you're not successful and the money's gone, it's all wrong, very much wrong—for you."

Goulburn had watched her inquisitively during this speech. He smiled as she finished it.

"I think," he said, with the half-shyness which she

already noticed in him, "I think you must be American."

She smiled.

"No," she said, "only half American—on my mother's side—though I have lived in the States a good deal. And what made you think so, *I pray?*"

"Something in what you said. It sounded like the smart things you hear of sometimes as having been said in America," he said. "I should think you are good at giving advice."

"I am—very good. Let me give you some."

"Yes?"

"Let me lend you twenty pounds."

Goulburn uttered a hasty exclamation. He sprang to his feet, and stood with flushed cheek and amazed eyes staring at her. She returned his gaze with unmoved composure.

"Lend—me—twenty pounds!" he repeated. "What do you——"

"I mean what I say. Let me lend you twenty pounds."

"But why should you?"

"Why should I? That's obvious. So that you can pay your sister."

Goulburn suddenly saw that she was not joking, but in sober earnest.

She had a curiously shaped purse in her hand, and her fingers were already on its clasp. Goulburn felt himself blushing hotly; he drew away from her.

"Oh, no, no!" he said. "I—I couldn't—I—please don't suggest such a thing."

"Now don't be silly. I'm not insulting you, though you are admittedly stony-broke, by offering you five shillings. I said, quite politely and in quite friendly fashion, 'Let me lend you twenty pounds.' I further explained why I wished to lend you twenty pounds."

Goulburn was still obviously puzzled. He put his hands in his pockets and began to dig a hole in the sand with the tip of his right boot. He kept his eyes intently fixed on this hole as he made it.

"Well?" she said, when he had remained thus occupied for some time. "Are you going to remain silent?"

"It's awfully kind of you," he said hurriedly. "Of course I appreciate such kindness immensely, but of course it's impossible. Why, you don't even know me, and——"

The girl yawned.

"I am wearied of smug British conventionality," she said, with mock pathos. "It's so dull. Now listen to me—listen to some common sense. See, I'm going to tick certain points off on my fingers. First, I believe you told me the exact truth; therefore I believe in your honesty. Second, I should like you to be able to give your sister her money at once, as I gather you always have done. Third, you can't—because you haven't got it. Fourth, I have, and will lend it to you with all the pleasure in the world, because I happen to be a very rich young woman, and sometimes like to use my money sensibly. Fifth—yes, there is a fifth reason."

"What is it?" asked Goulburn.

"Well," she said, looking away from him for the first time, "I shall feel hurt if you don't."

Goulburn set to work on the digging process again.

"You will completely spoil the toe of that boot," she said presently. "And it isn't necessary."

He looked up and faced her squarely.

"Very well," he said. "You shall lend me those twenty pounds on the understanding that I pay them to my sister to-morrow and—make a clean breast of it to her."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"That's honest of you," she said. "She'll understand."

"And that you allow me to repay you as quickly as I can. I shall be eager to do that," he said, somewhat proudly.

"Oh, of course," she replied. Then, unclasping her purse, she handed him some notes, after which she rose to her feet. "There! And what a fuss about nothing! We could have done all that in two minutes if you hadn't been so prim and proper."

"Will you please give me your name and address?" he said, producing a pocket-book and a pencil.

She hesitated a moment.

"My name is Moira Phillimore, and I am staying at Claridge's Hotel," she replied. "But I shall not be there after to-morrow. They will always have my address, though."

Goulburn drew out a card-case and handed her a

card. She looked at it first carelessly, then with a close scrutiny, and she suddenly gazed earnestly at him.

"Had you ever an uncle named Nathaniel?" she asked.

Goulburn laughed.

"Poor old Uncle Nat!" he said. "Yes, I had. I can just remember him. He went to the United States when I was a boy, and we never heard of him afterwards. Why?—is it possible that you ever met him?"

"No," she answered, "but I have heard of him—through friends. This is a small world. Now I must go. You go that way—I this."

With a smile and a wave of her hand she had gained the other side of the clearing before he could say more. She paused on the bank, turned, and flashed another smile on him.

"I said this is a small world!" she called to him. "So *Au revoir!*"

Then she was gone, and Goulburn set off across the Downs to the station. And as he went he said to himself more than once—

"*Au revoir!*"

CHAPTER II

FORTUNE'S WILD WHEEL

PEOPLE who remember the heat of the Derby Day in 1908, will remember also that the day which succeeded it was, if anything, still hotter. That Thursday the thermometer rose to 81 degrees in the shade; folk who sat out in the sun, as many and many a thousand did in the parks and public places of resort, felt as if they were being slowly roasted. There were Panama hats, light head-gear, and sunshades, cooling drinks, and ice-carts everywhere; men mopped perspiring foreheads, and hard-driven animals showed a desire to stop at every available water-trough. Overhead the sun blazed out of a leaden sky; the earth's surface burned beneath his ardent embraces. That section of London's overgrown population—no inconsiderable one—which is drawn from the south of Europe welcomed the heat, and dreamed dreams of Naples and Sicily as they lounged about the frowsy courts of Soho and the back streets of Hatton Garden; but there were not wanting those who were minded to grumble at the fierce sunlight, as being just as much a vagary of the English climate as the next winter hurricane. It was there to-day—where would it be to-morrow?

Nowhere in all the widespread expanse of London was that day's heat felt so much as in the city, where the streets are for the most part narrow and high, and where men are crowded together like sheep in a pen. It would have been hard to find a cool-looking man amidst the seething crowds around the Bank or in Leadenhall Street, or in Fenchurch Street, or in any of the thoroughfares where everybody bustles and hustles as if for dear life. True, there are plenty of delightfully shady nooks, cool enough in any weather, however tropical, in the old world squares and alleys of the city and behind the walls of its old churches, but who has time to stay in them when every one must get from some certain point to another in the shortest possible time? And so that strange hive of human bees sweltered, enduring in patience or cursing in impatience, while the sun grew hotter and hotter, and the pavements seemed as hard as adamant and as hot as a furnace.

Richard Goulburn, seated at his desk in his office at Messrs. Pepperall & Tardrew's, Tea Merchants, Mincing Lane, congratulated himself that it was well out of the sunlight. He remembered the vivid glare of the sun on the previous day, but that had been tempered by a stirring breeze; to-day, as he knew, having been out in the streets for half an hour at noon, there was no breeze, and the heat was great. The room in which he sat was at the back of the building, and looked into a court the walls of which were covered with white tiles, cool to look at and rarely get-at-able by the

sun. He had been glad to sit in such cool quarters most of the morning, for he was feeling somewhat slack and washed-out after his adventures of the previous day, and the anxieties through which he had passed had affected his nerves. He was also in a state of pleasant reflection about the fairy godmother upon whom he had so curiously and unexpectedly alighted, and had paid much more attention to her than to his account-books and letters. She had said that this is a small world, and that they would meet again; he was cudgeling his brains to think how, when, and where such a delightful event could happen. Certainly he very much wanted to see her again.

Then he became melancholy, and asked himself what good it could do if he did meet her. She was a very nice young lady, who could afford to carry a roll of bank-notes in her purse and to stay at Claridge's Hotel; while he was a poor clerk, who earned just one hundred and twenty pounds a year and lived in a cheap boarding-house in Bloomsbury. Oh, if he were only a rich man, with a town house and a country house, and horses and carriages and a car or two and a yacht and—— The door of the room was suddenly thrust open, and a head just as suddenly presented itself round it in a fashion which suggested that somebody had cut the body completely away from it and was now presenting the head itself as a trophy of prowess with beheading axe or sword. It was a somewhat noticeable head presented in this fashion, being covered with a thick crop of very red hair, rather thatchlike in tex-

ture and arrangement, and having a face beneath the hair which was chiefly remarkable for a pair of twinkling eyes, a snub nose, a very large mouth cut in a straight line and turned up at the corners, and a quantity of freckles each as big as a threepenny bit. It was the sort of face at the sight of which children and music-hall audiences immediately burst into shrieks of immoderate and unreasoning laughter, and it had been a matter of perplexity and wonder to a good many people that it should be found inside a tea broker's office in Mincing Lane.

"Aren't you coming to grub, Dickie?" asked the detached head. "It's five past one—come on."

Goulburn, who had been scribbling the name Moira over and over again on a sheet of notepaper (just to see how it looked), tore the paper into small fragments and threw the latter into the waste-basket.

"Doesn't seem a grubby day, does it, Chris?" he said lazily. "The sight of a chop would make me ill."

The head came farther into the room, proving itself to be the capital of a somewhat diminutive body, the legs of which were short and the arms long. One of the arms raised a long thin hand to the ceiling dramatically.

"Speak not of chops," said the straight lips which curled upwards at the ends. "I abhor them. A little something light, now?—and strawberries, I hear, are cheap to-day."

"Oh, well, I suppose we may as well," answered Goulburn indifferently as he took down his hat. "Come on, then."

The owner of the red hair opened the door with exaggerated politeness and bowed the other out with mock ceremony.

"Always clowning, Chris," said Goulburn half-peevisly.

"Much better than always crying, my dear," replied Chris. "What's the matter, infant? You look a bit so-so."

"Weather," said Goulburn laconically. "Can't stand heat—especially in this beastly city."

"How now—how now!" said Chris, in affected horror. "Speakest thou ill words of our ancient City of London, base-born provincial? Nay but——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Goulburn. "If you want to play the fool, why don't you go on the stage and have done with it?"

"Because I am but a poor thing of no presence," answered Chris, as they turned into a popular restaurant. "If I had your godlike looks, my friend, and your hyacinthine locks, and your first-walking-gentleman air, I would indeed seek to tread the boards; as I am what I am, I shall study the romance of tea in Mincing Lane. But what is the matter, Dick? You looked tired this morning when we walked in together, and now you look quite disgusted with life. Result of getting a day off and going to the Derby, eh, my son?"

Goulburn made no reply for a moment; at last, leaning over the table at which they had seated themselves, he said, in a low and meaning voice—

"I dare say I know why I'm looking a bit sick of life, Chris. It's just this. I'm tired of being poor. Tired of—a hundred and twenty a year. Tired of a Bloomsbury boarding-house. Tired of having to think about every penny before spending it. You know!"

Chris, who was eating strawberries and cream, shook his head.

"Yes," he said, "I know. You took envious glances at the coaches at Epsom yesterday, and wondered how it was that their occupants could lunch on champagne and *pâté de foie gras*, while you did ditto on a glass of lukewarm ale and a stale ham sandwich. Come off it, Dick—that never did any good. You're as much better off with your one hundred and twenty a year than the man who has nothing as they are than you."

"I never looked at the people on the coaches nor thought of them either," said Goulburn. "I didn't envy them, for I never recognised their existence. I say I'd like to be rich, not because other people are rich, but because I want to be rich."

"Subtle difference," answered Chris. "All right, old chap—get rich! Do it here slow, or go to America and do it quick!"

"I would go to America if I thought I could make a fortune there rapidly," said Goulburn.

"Would you? Well, thank God, I wouldn't!" exclaimed Chris heartily. "No, my boy; London is good enough for me. I am content and 'umble. Can't say I should object to another hundred tacked on to my modest competency, but——"

"Just think what it would mean to have so much money that you could do anything you liked!" said Goulburn, interrupting him and speaking with some fervour. "To be able to go where you like and when you like; to have houses, and horses, and yachts——"

"And every beggar in town on your doorstep, and your letter-box filled with appeals for charity written by impostors," said Chris. "Beautiful!"

"It is one of the pleasures of wealth to be able to give or lend to really necessitous cases," said Goulburn loftily.

Chris jumped in his chair with well-affected surprise.

"Noble and lofty sentiments!" he said. "And from one so young! Look here, Dick, do you think the sun got into your head a bit yesterday? You're not given to grousing about your hard lot, nor to talking cheap sentiment. Surely, old chap, you haven't fallen in love?"

"What use would that be on a hundred and twenty a year?" said Goulburn, rather more bitterly than his friend liked.

"Um! I don't know," said Chris. "I don't think love has got very much to do with the state of one's purse."

"No; but one's purse has got a good deal to do with the chances of being able to marry the girl you care about," said Goulburn. "Supposing a poor man falls in love with a very rich young woman, and—— Well, what is it, Phillips?"

An office-boy had entered the restaurant and came slowly along the centre passage searching the faces of the men seated on either side of the room. At last he had caught sight of Goulburn, and had advanced to the table at which he and Christopher Aspinall sat.

"If you please, Mr. Goulburn, Mr. Pepperall sent me out to find you and to tell you that he wanted to see you at once, sir," said the office-boy. "I told him I thought you'd be here."

"Does he want me too?" asked Chris, as Goulburn rose.

"No, sir—he only said Mr. Goulburn."

"I wonder what he wants?" said Goulburn, reaching for his hat.

"To tell you that you're the lost heir and are really a duke with fifty thousand a year," said Chris. "If the old man doesn't keep you long, Dick, come back, and we'll have a smoke. You're entitled to half an hour yet."

Goulburn left the restaurant and went slowly back to the office. Never dreaming that the senior partner wanted to see him about anything more important than some trifling business matter, he let his thoughts go back to the day before. At half-past one, an insignificant atom amongst the vast crowds on the Downs, he had been full of hope that he would win; two hours later he had been in the very depths of disappointment and regret; still later he had made the acquaintance, under romantic circumstances, of a girl whose face and voice he could not get out of his mind. She had been the

bright spot in his Derby Day—he wasn't sure that he wouldn't lose another twenty pounds just to see her once again.

"I suppose I'm in love with the thought of her," he said gloomily. "I might as well cry for the moon."

He walked into the office, laid his hat down, and knocked at the door of Mr. Pepperall's private room. He heard voices inside; then the senior partner's voice cried "Come in!" and Goulburn turned the handle of the door and entered.

There were two men in the room—Mr. Pepperall himself, a tall, rather portly old man, who affected old-fashioned collars, and cravats, and very voluminous frock-coats, and whose whiskers were always carefully brushed to a point exactly corresponding on each cheek; and a younger but still elderly man with a keen, observant, clean-shaven face, whose whole appearance suggested the highly respectable solicitor. This gentleman, as Goulburn entered the room, scanned him narrowly. As for the senior partner, his clerk saw very plainly that he was unwontedly nervous, if not agitated. He rose, rubbing his hands, as if he were somewhat embarrassed.

"Er—Mr. Goulburn," he said hurriedly, "I'm sure—er—very sorry to interrupt you at your lunch, but the fact is that this gentleman—Mr. Conybeare, this young gentleman is Mr. Goulburn—is anxious to have a little conversation with you on an important matter which he has already mentioned to me. Perhaps," concluded Mr. Pepperall, still palpably nervous and embarrassed

and still rubbing his hands, "perhaps I had better retire, Mr. Conybeare, so that you and Mr. Goulburn may——"

Mr. Conybeare held up a plump white hand on the little finger of which a fine diamond ring sparkled.

"By no means on my behalf, I pray, Mr. Pepperall," he said, with polite deprecation. "Never turn a man out of his own chair or his own room, you know, eh? And I am sure that Mr. Goulburn will have no objection to your hearing anything I have to say to him—eh, Mr. Goulburn?"

Goulburn, who had listened to all this with feelings of utter mystification, bowed his head.

"Certainly not, sir," he said. Then he added, as with an afterthought, "I haven't really the slightest notion of what you can have to say to me."

Mr. Conybeare chuckled; Mr. Pepperall, who rarely, in Goulburn's experience of him, showed signs of mirth, smiled and nodded his head.

"Can't think what I can have to say to him!" exclaimed Mr. Conybeare. "Ah, ah, see what it is to be mysterious—the mysterious, by the bye, enters largely into my profession, Mr. Pepperall—oh, I assure you, yes. Well, the fact is, my dear sir," he continued, turning to Goulburn and assuming a very business-like manner, "I wish to have a short conversation with you and to ask you a few questions, and I hope and believe that the result will prove eminently satisfactory. But won't you be seated?"

"Oh, I beg pardon, I beg pardon!" exclaimed Mr.

Pepperall. "Pray be seated—pray be seated, Mr. Goulburn."

Goulburn, who never remembered being invited to take a seat in the senior partner's private room before, did so, wondering what was coming. He turned toward Mr. Conybeare, who had produced some papers.

"Yes, sir?" he said.

"My dear young gentleman," said Mr. Conybeare, "from a little conversation which I have just had with Mr. Pepperall, I am, I believe, quite justified in saying that you are Richard Goulburn, aged twenty-four, the only son of the late Reverend Samuel Goulburn, who was vicar of Little Diddington, in the county of Oakshire, from 1869 until 1901, and that you yourself were born in that parish on June 15, 1883?"

"You are quite right, sir," replied Goulburn.

"You have an only sister, whose Christian name is Maisie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Pepperall, who tells me that he knew your father for a long period of years, tells me also that your sister is governess in his son's family."

"That is so, sir."

"There would not be the slightest difficulty in proving the identity of yourself and your sister as the only children of the late Reverend Samuel Goulburn?"

"Not the slightest, sir."

Mr. Pepperall rubbed his hands together and echoed his clerk's words—

"Not the slightest, sir!"

Mr. Conybeare produced a very large silk handkerchief, and mopped his forehead. This done, he rose with a countenance composed to extreme solemnity, and advancing to Goulburn extended his plump white hand.

"Then, my dear sir," he said, "allow me to congratulate you on being a very fortunate young man. It is my pleasing duty to inform you that your late uncle, my esteemed client, the late Mr. Nathaniel Goulburn, formerly of Chicago but recently of London, has left you and your sister Maisie his entire fortune—two-thirds to you, sir; one-third to her. The—er—the amount in question is—er—roughly speaking, seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Sir, permit me to shake you by the hand."

"And permit me to offer my congratulations also, Goulburn," said Mr. Pepperall, who was quite overcome. "Dear me! dear me! What extraordinary things one does hear of! Um—God bless my soul! I think, Mr. Conybeare, that this joyous occasion might prove a proper excuse for—eh?—a glass of champagne—eh? I have some excellent wine in this cupboard. Ah, yes, a clean glass. Dear me! Dear me! Seven—hundred—and—fifty thousand! My dear Goulburn, I am delighted."

The recipient of these congratulations was just then scarcely in a state to hear them. He was in a dream. Only a few minutes ago he had grumbled to his friend Christopher Aspinall because he was poor; now he was rich—rich—much richer than he had ever dreamed of

being even after a life of long and eminently successful toil. And somehow, he scarcely dared to realise it. Half a million of money! And his sister—just as rich as himself. What would she say?

"It will be some time before I can really realise it," he said, when Mr. Pepperall had forced a glass of champagne into his hand and had made him drink it off. "It seems—unbelievable."

"Solid, unmistakable, tangible fact, my dear sir," said the man of law. "As much a fact, sir, as the Bank of England."

"There is something I wish you would tell me, then," said Goulburn, "and that is—when did my Uncle Nathaniel die and where? and how long had he been in England? and how was it that he did not communicate with his relatives?—though, to be sure, Maisie and I are all he had left, and I dare say no one knew where we had got to."

"My dear sir," replied Mr. Conybeare, "I will give you the information in brief. Your Uncle Nathaniel, who, from what I saw of him, was an eccentric man, returned to this country in the autumn of last year; and because he desired to be near a certain eminent physician, Sir Adolphus Yorstoun, who, as you know, is the man of the day for gout, he bought himself a house in Harley Street, and there he lived, in the strictest seclusion, until his death, which occurred about six weeks since. Now, some weeks before his death he sent for me,—for the pure and simple reason that I had once met him in crossing the Atlantic, and that he

had taken a fancy to me,—and told me to draw up his will on the lines I have indicated to you. When it came to inserting the addresses of yourself and your sister, he frankly said that he didn't know where you were. I suggested making inquiries—he wouldn't hear of them. What he said in effect was this: 'I'm going to die, and I don't want to be bothered by anything or anybody. I've done with my money, and Sam's youngsters shall have it. I don't know where they are—find them when I'm gone.' I objected that they might be dead—he wouldn't hear a word, and observed that all the Goulbourns were long-lived. So the will was duly made, attested, and executed, and soon afterwards he died."

"How was it we never heard of his death?" asked Goulburn.

"It would have been a wonder if you had, sir," replied the solicitor, with a dry laugh. "I told you he was eccentric—well, you can judge of his eccentricity from a few little things. He paid his doctor in cash as soon as he could get him to tell him definitely how long he would live. He paid my firm—Conybeare, Hamilton, & Calfin, of Bedford Row—in just the same way at the same time, and exacted from us a solemn promise that we would faithfully carry out his last wishes. He desired to be buried in the plainest possible fashion, to be followed to the grave by no one but myself, and to have the plainest of tombstones set up over his grave the day after his burial with nothing but his initials and the date of his death carved upon it.

Of course, we followed everything out exactly as he wished. Then the next thing to do was to find Mr. Richard Goulburn and Miss Maisie Goulburn—eh?”

Mr. Conybeare winked, and took a sip of his champagne.

“Now you may think that that was an easy task considering that fortunes of such value were awaiting those fortunate young people,” he continued. “But I can assure you both that it was one of the most difficult tasks I had ever been brought to face, because, beyond the fact that you, Mr. Goulburn, and your sister were the children of the Reverend Samuel Goulburn, and were both born at Little Diddington, we had nothing to go on. Then the old gentleman had laid upon us a strict charge that we should do nothing to find you until he had been in his grave exactly forty-two days—he had had some fad about that. Well, when that period had expired, which is a few days ago, I personally went down to Little Diddington and made inquiries, first verifying and copying the requisite entries in the parish registers. But beyond ascertaining that you had both left the village after your father’s death, I could learn nothing, though some people thought you were both in London, while others were certain you had gone to America. So I came back to town, and we were going to commence inquiries in the ordinary way when—well, I suddenly discovered—this very morning—that there was a Richard Goulburn, nephew of a Nathaniel Goulburn, in the employ of Messrs. Pepperall & Tardrew in Mincing Lane, whereupon I came here at

once, and—well, gentlemen, I think I may conclude by varying the words of the great Roman and saying, 'I came—I saw—I have found.' "

"Yes," said Goulburn. "But—how did you find? Pardon me, but I'm curious to know how you got the information that I was here."

Mr. Conybeare smiled enigmatically.

"Ah, my dear sir, we lawyers learn many secrets," he said, "and we acquire knowledge in many strange ways. Rest content, sir, with the knowledge that you are undoubtedly the real Simon Pure, and may enter into your heritage at once, if you so please. The executors of your uncle's will are myself and my junior partner, Benjamin Calfin, and we will expedite matters as quickly as possible. There is your uncle's house ready for you in Harley Street, beautifully furnished, full of works of art, and newly decorated. Bring your sister to see me to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and we will settle everything that is at present necessary."

Goulburn presently left the senior partner's private room and went thoughtfully to the office, where he knew he would find Chris at work. That worthy was just opening a big ledger—at sight of his friend's preoccupied face he shut it with a bang.

"No bad news, old chap, I hope?" he said.

Goulburn shook his head. He crossed the floor and laid his hand on the little man's shoulder.

"Chris," he said, "I've come into a fortune. My uncle's left me five hundred thousand pounds."

Christopher Aspinall's eyes bulged. Christopher

Aspinall's mouth widened into an enormous circle. He seized his friend's hands and wrung them without a word.

"And Chris—he's left Maisie two hundred and fifty thousand."

Then Chris found his tongue. He uttered something like a moan, and, dropping his arms on his desk, hid his face in them and moaned again. Goulburn bent over him anxiously.

"What is it, Chris?" he asked. "What is it, old boy?"

Chris groaned.

"I love Maisie, Dick!" he said—"loved her for years. And—I—I believe she loves me, ugly as I am. And now—oh, hang your old uncle!—some duke'll be making up to her."

Goulburn laughed for the first time that day.

"Shut up, you old ass!" he said. "If Maisie cares for you, all the money in the world wouldn't keep her from you. Look here: as soon as we leave the office, we'll go down to South Kensington to see her and tell her the news. And I'll stand you a bottle of champagne on the way, Chris, my boy, and you can ask Maisie to marry you this very night if you like, with my brotherly blessing to both of you—so there! Heavens, Chris! it's like a dream! But it's true—it's true!"

That evening, as the two friends walked along the south side of Hyde Park in the direction of the Albert Gate, Chris, who was staring about him, suddenly

felt Goulburn grip his shoulder. He turned inquiringly—to see an eager, excited look on his friend's face.

"What's the matter, Dick?" he asked.

"Chris," said Goulburn, in a low voice, "go straight on to Maisie's, and take her into Kensington Gardens. If I don't meet you near the pond there—you know where—take her home, and come to my place at ten o'clock. Tell her the news, and say I shall call for her at nine in the morning. Don't ask questions now, Chris. I've just seen some one I must speak to to-night."

Then he turned and went back by the way they had come—in search of a certain carriage in which he had seen the lady of Epsom Downs.

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET

THE Park was full at that hour of the evening, and as Goulburn walked hurriedly back, the long line of cars and carriages at his side came to a halt, necessitated by some stoppage in front. Affecting a deep interest in his fellow-pedestrians and in the occupants of the penny chairs, he passed on until he had left behind him the coupé brougham in which he had caught a momentary glimpse of the lady of his dreams. Turning swiftly and keeping close to the rails, he went back again, this time betraying an equal interest in the occupants of the carriages which were still motionless. And in another moment he was opposite the coupé brougham—and they were looking at each other.

She was alone, and she gave him a little nod and a bright smile, and for a second or two her colour rose a little. She half-inclined herself toward him; he bent over the rails. Whether or not it was the knowledge that he was now a very wealthy man he could not tell, but he was conscious that he felt a very much braver and more self-confident individual than on the previous afternoon. Under ordinary circumstances he would have felt much embarrassed in daring to address a

young lady so publicly; now he felt quite at his ease, and utterly careless of his surroundings.

"I wish I could speak to you for a few moments," he said. "I have something to tell you—something that you will like to hear."

"Why not?" she said. "Come into the brougham, and I will tell them to go round the Park—then we can talk."

It seemed the greatest of all the mysteries which had happened during the past thirty-six hours to find himself sitting side by side with this elegant young creature and to realise that he need no longer be afraid of thinking about her. The string of equipages moved on; he began to feel the first fruits of luxury in the soft cushions and easy-going motion of the coupé brougham.

"Well?" she said, turning to him with an encouraging smile. "What is your news?"

"It is so wonderful that I can scarcely realise it," replied Goulburn. "But it's true; and when I accidentally caught sight of you driving past, I wanted you to know it at once."

"Yes—why?" she asked.

"Because you were so kind to me yesterday. And—sympathetic," he added, in a lower tone.

"Tell me the news," she said.

"Well," he said, as with some shyness, "do you know I have suddenly become a rich man? My uncle has left me five hundred thousand pounds, and he has

left my sister half that amount. I was on my way to tell her the good news when I caught sight of you.”

“Now that you have told me, hadn’t you better stop the brougham and run off to her?” she suggested, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes which Goulburn did not catch.

“Well—er,” he said, “you see, Christopher Aspinall was with me, and he has gone on to tell her. He’ll tell her better than I could, because they’re in love with each other. But you don’t seem surprised by my news?”

“No; I’m not, very. I’m never surprised by anything—or by anybody. Did I not tell you that this is a little world, and that we should soon meet again?”

Goulburn’s brains were gradually getting clearer and sharper—he suddenly turned, and, looking her squarely in the face, scrutinised her narrowly.

“Ah!” he said. “I’m beginning to see things. It—it must have been you who told Mr. Conybeare of me. Was it? Was it?”

Miss Phillimore laughed gently.

“I suppose there’s no need to make a mystery of it,” she said. “Yes, it was I. You see, my father was engaged in business in the United States for several years, and I have heard him mention old Nat Goulburn often, and describe him as a very astute and eccentric man. When I came back to London recently, I happened to mention your uncle’s name to my uncle, Dr. van Mildart, with whom I am now staying in Harley Street, and I discovered that until Nathaniel’s

death, a few weeks ago, they had been next-door neighbours. Then, last Monday, I called in to see Mr. Conybeare, who is my solicitor; and in talking of various matters we got to the difficulty of finding people, especially in London. 'Yes,' he said; 'there's a young fellow named Richard Goulburn and his sister Maisie whom I want to find. I've three-quarters of a million waiting for them.' Then, of course, I found out that Richard and Maisie were nephew and niece of Nathaniel. The next discovery was during our romantic meeting yesterday. You gave me your name; you told me your business address. Naturally, I went to see Mr. Conybeare first thing this morning. As for the rest—well!"

"And so I have you to thank for this good fortune!" he exclaimed.

"I? Not a bit of it. You would have been unearthed rather quickly, you may be sure," she said. "Of course, our chance meeting yesterday helped to expedite matters."

"But what a fortunate—a strange—chance that we should so meet!" he said.

"I agree that it was fortunate—I don't agree that it was strange," she replied. "I don't believe that there is anything strange in what people will call coincidence or chance—though I don't say that all things are arranged. Just look how things really do happen in real life! You are going along in perfect serenity or its opposite, in idleness or in too much struggle, in poverty or in wealth, and you suddenly turn a sharp corner, and, before you

realise it, the whole current of your life has been changed."

"I know that yesterday's meeting with you has changed the whole current of my life," said Goulburn, in a low voice which was not without some show of feeling in it.

"And I know that we're going to have a real bad storm," said Miss Phillimore, bending forward and looking out of the window. "I've felt it coming for an hour or more. There's the beginning," she continued, as a blinding flash of lightning cut the dull skies above the Park. "I'll tell them to drive straight home."

"Then I had better leave you," said Goulburn regretfully.

"If you want to be wet through, you may," she said, laughing. "There will be a perfect Niagara of rain in a few minutes, and there's no shelter. Come home with me, and I'll introduce you to your future next-door neighbour, my uncle, Dr. van Mildart. He will ask you to dine with——"

"But——" began Goulburn.

"Oh, I know all that already," she laughed. "You have no clothes in your waistcoat pocket, and you did not expect to have the pleasure, and perhaps my uncle may not care—and so on. All wrong—the clothes don't matter, and Dr. van Mildart will be delighted to meet Mr. Richard Goulburn, whose story he is already acquainted with, because I told him of it myself to-day at luncheon as soon as Conybeare telephoned me that he had found you to be the real man. Besides, there is

another reason why you should go to Harley Street."

"Yes?" said Goulburn inquiringly. "And that is——?"

"Because I asked you to," she answered. "I am accustomed to having my own way when I know it is good for me and others."

"I believe I shall be afraid of you," said Goulburn presently, as they were driving hurriedly through the rain-swept streets.

"Worse things than that might happen to you," she answered. "I am very wise, seeing that I am still so young. Did I not tell you how heavy the rain would be?"

The storm of that evening—the heaviest which London had known that summer—was at its height when they drove up to Dr. van Mildart's house in Harley Street, and they were glad to make a dash for the door. But Goulburn had time to snatch a hurried glance at the front of the house and at that of the one next to it, which he now knew to be his own. In that hurried glance he noted what seemed to him an unusual thing in the matter of house decoration, especially in the West End of London, where householders mostly affect brightness of colour. Dr. van Mildart's house was painted—and recently painted—in sombre black from cornice to basement. Its next-door neighbours' had also received their annual renovation, but each was of a gay disposition, and that in which Nathaniel Goulburn had ended his days was particularly bright in its spotless whiteness and fresh light green paint.

The door of the black house was opened by a man whom Goulburn instinctively took to be Dr. van Mildart's butler. Once within the hall, which was well lighted and in cheerful contrast to the gloomy exterior of the house, he looked at this man carefully, having never seen a man of his exact type before. He was a tall, well-made man, apparently of close upon sixty years of age, very neatly and carefully dressed in sober black, and possessed of quiet movement and self-contained manner. So far he resembled thousands of well-trained serving-men. But it was his face, and especially his eyes, which interested Goulburn most deeply. The face, a bored, somewhat heavy one, topped by a wide, intellectual-looking forehead, surmounted by smoothly brushed hair now perfectly snow-white, was of a curious tint of colour, somewhat akin to that of well-preserved old parchment. It was very deeply seamed and lined, and on one side—the left—there was a scar which ran from near the lobe of the ear to the corner of the mouth. The eyes were more than usually deep set in the sockets; they were of a light grey colour, steady and calm, but . . . strange. They looked to Goulburn like the eyes of a dead man.

"My uncle is in his laboratory, I suppose, Pimperry?" said Miss Phillimore, as she shook the raindrops from her dainty skirts.

"Yes, madam."

The man's voice was like his eyes—cold, dull, dead. It might have been the voice of a ghost.

"Then take Mr. Goulburn into the library while I go

to him," she commanded. "If there is anything you want, Mr. Goulburn, ask for it."

Then she ran up the stairs, and Goulburn, in obedience to a gentle bow from the man with the dead eyes and voice, followed him along the hall into a large room which terminated in a conservatory.

"Is there anything that I can get for you, sir?"

Again the same deadness of tone, the suggestion of—what?

"No, thank you," replied Goulburn, "nothing."

The man bowed and left the room as noiselessly as he had entered it, and Goulburn, choosing an easy-chair, sat down and looked about him. He had a love of books, and had indulged it as far as his hitherto limited means would permit; he resolved now that he would set to work on the formation of a library. The room in which he sat was filled with books from floor to ceiling, all arranged in open shelving of old dark oak, which was surmounted at intervals by marble or bronze busts. Over the fireplace was a fine old triptych of the Dutch school; at one end of the room a quaintly carved table was covered with magazines, reviews, and pamphlets; at the other, nearer the conservatory, was a great dark table strewn with papers, bundles of manuscripts, note-books, and all the sort of impedimenta which accumulate around the student.

Goulburn presently rose and began to wander about the room, reading the titles of the books, of which, according to a hasty calculation, there must have been ten or twelve thousand. They were in all branches of

literature—history, philosophy, theology, poetry. He was somewhat surprised, considering that he was in the house of a medical man, to find that there were more volumes of belles-lettres than on scientific subjects. He reflected, however, that the doctor had most likely a study of his own where he kept his scientific works; to his mind they were best left out of a fine collection like that which he was inspecting. And just then, hearing the door gently opened, he turned from gazing at a magnificent edition of the Old English dramatists to find himself confronted by the man whom he supposed to be its owner.

Goulburn knew nothing, or next to nothing, of the medical profession, but he had so far always associated it with black coats, top hats, heavy gold watch-chains, and bland manners allied to mellifluous voices. He had also an impression, gained from recollections of early childhood, that most doctors were tall, heavily built men, with bald heads and mutton-chop whiskers, and that their linen was always very glossy and their hands very white. Having this general impression in his mind, he was more than a little surprised to find himself shaking hands with a gentleman of apparently forty-five or fifty years, who was certainly not of medium height, who wore a rather sporting-looking lounge suit of a distinctly large check, and who, from his fringed hair and his Vandyke beard,—both of a brownish yellow in tint,—might have been supposed much more reasonably to be a painter than a physician. Moreover, he wore a pink and blue shirt, and brown shoes. Rather

a smart cheery-looking little doctor this, with nothing lugubrious about him; he reminded some of his patients of a rather perky robin, always hopping hither and thither. There was one great drawback about him, however, which Goulburn noticed at once—he was evidently very short-sighted, or suffered from some affection of the eyes; and this obliged him to wear dark spectacles, which were adjusted in such a fashion that it was impossible to see his eyes in any way. It also made him hold his head as folk do who peer at you through half-shut lids; thus his pointed Vandyke beard seemed to be a torpedo directed against your heart.

“Mr. Goulburn? I am Dr. van Mildart, and very glad to see you, and pleased that my niece should have brought you to see me, especially as I suppose we shall be neighbours. Your uncle was my neighbour for some months; I used to see him now and then getting in and out of his car, but I never had the pleasure of speaking to him. But sit down, sit down, Mr. Goulburn—we will have a glass of wine together and a cigarette, and I trust you will stay and dine with us. Oh, no excuses—quite informal, quite informal. I’m not going to change my clothes for dinner to-night—too much of a fag in this beastly weather. Try one of those cigarettes, and Pimperry shall bring in some sherry.”

It was a curious voice, Goulburn thought—sharp, shrill, almost a falsetto. There was nothing of the usual professional voice in it: rather, it possessed a flavour of Bohemianism; and once again Goulburn thought that he could better picture Dr. van Mildart with a

palette and brush than in a consulting room. The little man's manners were just as free-and-easy as his speech; he threw himself into an easy-chair when the strange-looking butler had been and gone, pledged his guest in eminently British fashion, and settling down to his cigarette, looked at him with an amused smile playing about the corners of his moustached mouth.

"How does it feel to become rich all of a sudden?" he said. "No harm in asking—it's my little way. I like to find out everything I can about human emotion and feeling."

"Oh, I don't mind!" replied Goulburn. "But you see, I can't tell, because I haven't yet realised it. I feel as if—well, as if there had been an earthquake!"

"Ah, not a bad definition," said Dr. van Mildart. "I once felt something of the same sort of feeling myself—only in my case it was when I discovered that I'd suddenly lost every penny I had in the world, and literally hadn't anything but what I stood up in and the little spare cash I had in my pockets. However, these sudden chops and changes in fortune have one great merit—they're interesting. Most of the rest of life is dull—drab. What'll you do with your fortune now that you've come into it?"

Goulburn, who found the dry sherry and the Egyptian cigarettes very pleasing, laughed.

"I haven't had time to think of that," he answered. "You must remember that I have only known that it was mine since half-past one o'clock. I suppose I shall have to take advice."

"Oh, you'll get more advice than you could stow away in the British Museum if the advice were reduced to writing!" said Dr. van Mildart. "You'll be surprised at the advice you'll get. It'll come in its thousands when your case gets noised abroad from all the heights—and the depths. Inventors, now! Shade of Solomon, they'll be on to you like beetles on to a carcass or flies on to a pot of jam. And cranks of all descriptions—church cranks, chapel cranks, missionaries, societies for this, that, or the other. Oh, it's a nice thing to come into a half-million of money, but it's got its responsibilities and its drawbacks all the same. There's my niece there, now, Moira—well, that girl's worth very nearly a million pounds, all in her own control, and, of course, that's a nice little fortune, though a small one for the States, where everything is on a big scale; but the way she was pestered out of her life when it was known that Phillimore was dead and that everything was hers, was enough to drive any sensitive human being away to the regions of barbaric loneliness. Oh, after all, I don't know whether the poor man hasn't the best time of it—he misses a lot both ways."

Goulburn made no reply to this. He was thinking of his experiences of life since he had had to earn his living for himself. True, he had never known what it was to starve, to go without decent if well-worn clothing, or to spend a night in the streets homeless. But he had known hunger more than once, and shabbiness often; and it had often been all that he could do to save, or even earn, the weekly rent for his room. Of late

years, since his going to Pepperall & Tardrew's, things had not been so bad, but he had some recollections of earlier days, when, coming to London as a mere boy, he had had to go through the mill. And he made a face at the recollection.

"No!" he said. "It's not nice to be poor; it's nasty."

Dr. van Mildart lighted another cigarette, pushed the box across to his guest, and gave him one of his queer, quizzical smiles.

"Um!" he said. "I wonder how poor you've ever been—just how far you've ever gone down? Not so far, I guess."

"Well, I've never quite starved," Goulburn admitted, with the laugh of a man who admits that he's been near a thing but not quite up to it; "nor gone without shirt, either."

The man who swung his leg carelessly over the arm of his easy-chair and sipped his old sherry with the unmistakable air of a connoisseur of good wine laughed. There was something in that laugh which jarred on Goulburn's nerves, overwrought as they were by the exciting events of the day. It suggested all sorts of things—all unpleasant.

"Never quite starved—never gone without shirt!" repeated Dr. van Mildart. "Lucky dog! Shade of Solomon! I've done both—and gone without boots too. I've spent nights on that Embankment of yours in winter, shivering, hungry. I've spent days in New York just half-mad for want of food. I've known what it was to be stranded in a Canadian town in winter when you

couldn't get a job anyway, and had to sleep in filthy Chinese lodging-houses of the very lowest class until you were covered with vermin and—— Yes, I guess I've gone through all that—and more. Let me tell you, Mr. Goulburn, you don't know what that expression 'to be poor' means till you find yourself, with just enough rags to hide your naked body and without a cent in the world, in some town (especially one like this!) where you don't know a soul and nobody cares for you any more than they would for a pariah dog, and where hope just snuffs out——”

“To be revived again,” interrupted Goulburn.

Dr. van Mildart elevated his Vandyke beard.

“There are other things than hope which revive life and effort,” he said drily. “But come, we're near dinner-time. I'll take you to my room to make your toilet.”

Whatever strange vicissitudes his host might have passed through in earlier stages of his career, there was no doubt, thought Goulburn, as he followed him through the hall and up the stairs and past the open doors of various rooms, that he was now a wealthy man. The house appeared to be furnished in the most magnificent style; the staircase was ornamented with fine pictures and with cabinets of rare old china; everything betokened wealth, ease, luxury. Goulburn made some comment on one of the pictures they passed. Dr. van Mildart laughed.

“Ah, you won't think anything of my poor bits of pictures when you see your own!” he said. “Your

lamented uncle, my late neighbour, was a bit of a fancier and more than a bit of a judge. I'll tell you a secret: I bribed the caretaker—quite a worthy fellow, by the bye—to let me have a look at what we call 'next door' one day. You will see—you will see! There are some Greuzes there—and some Corots—which made my mouth water. And there is a collection of Missals which must have cost a prince's ransom. My dear sir! my poor house is a mere peasant's hut compared to your own—which I suppose you will inspect to-morrow."

Goulburn found that Dr. van Mildart had spoken in seriousness when he promised him a dinner without ceremony. He led him straight to the dining-room when they went downstairs, and there they stood chatting for a minute or two until the ringing of a delicately modulated silver bell brought Moira Phillimore and a young lady, who appeared to be some twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age, and who was very handsome and had very lively eyes, into the room. Dr. van Mildart peered at them through his glasses.

"Ah, yes," he said. "Moira, you already know Mr. Goulburn. Miss Lamotte, this gentleman is Mr. Richard Goulburn, who is going to be our next-door neighbour. Mr. Goulburn, this lady is Miss Caroline Lamotte, my assistant. Now, Pimpery, we will dine in amity."

If the host's manner and conversation were easy and informal as ever, his dinner and his wines were exceptional. Goulburn found how easy it was to sink into the luxuries and pleasures of life. The women were

pretty and witty; Dr. van Mildart was a brilliant talker; everything was delightful; he himself joined in with the spirit of the moment, and was as lively as his three companions. Was life going to be like that always now, he wondered? Then he thought of the cheerless, lonely meals—"grubs," as Chris called them—which he used to have in his lodgings. What a contrast!

But as he sat there, eating his good food and sipping his host's choice vintages, there was one thing that secretly worried him, got on his nerves, and was as a skeleton at the feast, and that was the butler, Pimperry. The man's face was like a mask, and the eyes were as dead as ever. Try as he would, Goulburn could not help looking at him. Whenever he did so, he was conscious of some feeling which he could not fathom.

There was another man-servant in the room—a perfect specimen of the thoroughly trained English footman. He was statue-like in his demeanour: his smooth face, with its small mouth and slightly aquiline nose, looked as if nothing could break its calm. But the man with the dead eyes put this person out of recollection.

Goulburn went home that night in a taxi-cab. Once upon a time—yes, yesterday—he would have thought this a monstrous piece of extravagance. Now, as he dismissed the cab at the corner of Guilford Street, he gave its driver five shillings.

As he felt for his latchkey, his fingers encountered a twisted scrap of paper. He drew this out, untwisted it, held it up to the light of the street lamp opposite his

door, and read the words scrawled upon it in pencil, and in what seemed to him to be a feigned hand—

“Young gentleman—take the advice of one who knows, and for Heaven’s sake be careful what you have to do with the Black House in Harley Street!”

CHAPTER IV

MAISIE'S PASS-BOOK

ONCE within his rooms, Goulburn turned up the gas and reread this strange epistle. It was written on a half-sheet of the very commonest notepaper—such as is purchased so many sheets, so many envelopes, with a pen and penholder thrown in, for a penny; and although the spelling was quite in order, the handwriting was either genuinely illiterate or designedly so. Looking at it still more carefully, Goulburn was inclined to fancy that it was affected. He had some knowledge of calligraphy, and prided himself on his own penmanship, and it seemed to him that this curious message had been written by some one who in reality wrote a very good hand, and had taken rather clumsy measures to disguise it on this occasion. Even with this conclusion in his mind, he could not account for the presence of the scrap of paper in his pocket. He carried his latchkey in a small inside pocket of his lounge jacket—who could have come so near him as to deposit the paper there? He tried to think of any moment in which he had been in close quarters with any one during the evening. Certainly he had shared a somewhat narrow settee with Moira Phillimore in the drawing room, while Miss Lamotte was playing the piano

close by, but he was quite sure that her very slightest movement could not have escaped him. He remembered van Mildart holding him in close conversation—buttonholing him, in fact—in the hall just before he left, and keeping him and Pimperly, who was holding his hat and stick, waiting for some moments before letting him go; but it was scarcely likely that the doctor would slip into his guest's pocket a document which seemed to hint dark things against his own establishment. Yet—there was the fact that the note had been slipped into his pocket, and there it was.

"I'm not sure that that isn't the biggest mystery of all," he said to himself, as he sealed the ill-written epistle up in an envelope, marked the letter with the date, and put it away in his writing-case. Then, glancing at his mantelpiece, he caught sight of a note addressed to himself in Christopher Aspinall's well-known, characteristic handwriting. He smiled as he opened it—there could be no mystery about anything which Chris had to communicate.

"DEAR DICK," wrote Chris, "I waited in for you from ten until I couldn't wait any longer. Maisie and I are engaged—we became engaged soon after I told her the good news; because, of course, as soon as I had told her, I also told her that—well, I don't know what I did tell her, but anyway, she said that if it was two hundred and fifty millions instead of thousands she wouldn't have anybody but me, which was good of her, and just what I expected. And, of course, being

the sober and sensible-minded young people that we are, we have made certain arrangements of a proper nature; but don't you think that I'm going to leave Pepperall & Tardrew simply because I shall have a wealthy wife—no, sir, I'm going to stick to business more than ever, and become a merchant prince and Lord Mayor of my native city. In the meantime, I shall visit you, I expect, occasionally, in marble halls. It's well that I managed a new dress suit out of my last year's savings, for your present quarters will not hold you much longer, I'm thinking. Well, no more from your affectionate

“CHRIS.

“P.S.—Maisie will be ready for you at ten o'clock.”

Goulburn smiled as he laid this epistle aside. “Present quarters suit him much longer!” No, indeed—good harbour of refuge that they had proved in times past, he should be glad to sail out to wider seas and ampler stretches. He looked about him at the somewhat dingily papered walls; at the pictures which were supposed to ornament them—pictures of the sentimental variety so dear to our ancestors of that awful mid-Victorian age when women wore crinolines and pork-pie hats, and young ladies played the Battle of Prague to evening parties carefully lined up round the drawing-room walls with their eyes on the ceiling and their hands gracefully composed; and at the cheap ornaments on the mantelpiece; at the plush upholstered chair and sofa; and at the glass-fronted chiffonier in which he kept his

tea and coffee, and his butter and his sugar, and such-like matters, and always smelled, in consequence, not unlike a grocer's shop. Until now he had heeded these things very little. They were conveniences, and no more. He had a desk of his own in the window, and a bookcase of his own in the recess at its side, with a hundred or so of his favourite books in it; and these things were all that ever concerned him when he spent his evenings or Sundays alone. But now, remembering the house he had just left, this little Bloomsbury lodging seemed very mean and colourless—when he thought of van Mildart's enthusiastic description of the house in Harley Street which awaited him and Maisie, it seemed to stifle him. He threw up the window and looked out into the street; the pavements were still glistening after the evening's heavy rain, and the reflection of the lamps shone like spots of liquid gold upon them. Gold!—well, he had plenty of that now, anyway, and he and Maisie—particularly Maisie, who had had to work harder than he had, in view of the fact that she was not strong and therefore less fitted to bear work—would begin to enjoy it.

"It will feel strange leaving a poky little hole like this and going to live in a big house," he thought as he retired to bed.

But there Goulburn was wrong. Human beings, if they have even the elements of adaptability in them, can adapt themselves to changed circumstances almost as naturally and as readily as the birds and beasts of the Arctic regions adapt their colour to the changing

seasons. In a very short time he and his sister were in occupation of the house in Harley Street, and had settled down there as if to the manner born. Indeed, to use an old-fashioned North-country phrase, there was nothing for them to do but to walk in and hang their hats up. Everything was in readiness for them. There was a full staff of servants—all women; for it turned out that the late Mr. Nathaniel Goulburn had a further eccentricity in the shape of an insuperable dislike to men-servants, whom he had been wont to refer to in various terms of disparagement, though he had not scrupled to provide a male caretaker, an ex-soldier, for the protection of the house and its staff during the interregnum between his death and the arrival of his successors—and the entire establishment was in well-oiled order under the direction of a housekeeper, Mrs. Magstone. And, as Mr. Conybeare remarked, if any two young people could desire more than to be put in possession of a beautifully furnished house, with pictures, and old china, and rare books, and musical instruments, and, most important of all, a first-class cook and a capital cellar of choice vintages—well, they must be very hard to please. It was through Mrs. Magstone's instrumentality—innocent enough on her part—that the brother and sister solved the last of the mystery which had hung about Uncle Nathaniel Goulburn, benefactor and eccentric. On the first night of their arrival, as they sat together in as cosy a smoking-room as heart could desire, Goulburn enjoying one of the dead man's cigars (such a cigar as he had never tasted

in his life) and Maisie still lost in bewilderment of their good fortune (and also expectant of the arrival of Mr. Christopher Aspinall), the housekeeper knocked at the door and entered the room with all the solemnity which a rustling silk gown and a fine lace cap could communicate. In her hand she carried a letter, which Goulburn immediately noticed to be heavily sealed.

"Mr. Goulburn," said Mrs. Magstone, "I have intruded, sir, for the purpose of discharging a duty laid upon me by your uncle, my late employer, Mr. Nathaniel Goulburn. A few days before his death, the deceased gentleman requested my presence at his bedside, and thus addressed me: 'Mrs. Magstone,' he said, 'you're an honest woman, and I can trust you. I shall soon be gone, Mrs. Magstone, and sooner or later you'll have my nephew and his sister here in my stead. Now, Mrs. Magstone, you see this letter, written in my own hand,' which of course I said I did. 'Well, Mrs. Magstone,' he continued, 'I desire you to take charge of this letter and to keep it in strict safety until my nephew enters this house as its master. On the first evening of his arrival, you will hand it to him with your own hand.' And having given him my sacred promise, sir," concluded Mrs. Magstone, "I received the document from him, which I now hand over to you in discharge of my duty."

Having said these words, Mrs. Magstone retired from the smoking-room with as much dignity as she had entered it, leaving the brother and sister to stare at each other.

"More mystery, Dick!" said Maisie.

"We'll soon see what it is, anyway," said her brother, breaking the seal, and drawing out a large sheet of quarto notepaper folded in four and scribbled over with the late Nathaniel's large, sprawling handwriting. "Ah, it's addressed to both of us. Listen":—

"MY DEAR NEPHEW AND NIECE,—You'll read this when I'm dead, and you'll no doubt, by the time you do read it, have heard me spoken of as a very queer and eccentric old man. Very likely I'm both—it doesn't matter, for I'm perfectly sane, and perhaps clearer in mind than I ever was. I want to write a few words to you, conjointly. I dare say you've wondered why I left you all my money. I'll tell you why. Because I knew you wouldn't waste it. I bluffed the lawyers—I told old Conybeare that I didn't know where you were. As a matter of fact, I knew all the time. When I came back to England I soon found out all about you both, and that you were earning your livings in a steady, honest way; and I determined you should have what I'd got. But I didn't tell him all I knew—I thought he might as well do a bit more for his money. Besides, I knew he'd soon find you; and if he hadn't, I'd made provision for your being found within three months of my death. Don't feel bad because I didn't send for you—I knew I hadn't got long, and I didn't want bothering—young folk ain't old folk. Well, now, you've got the money. Have a good time, but never touch your capital. Don't go marrying worn-out aristocracy. Don't run race-

horses nor yet ballet-dancers, Richard; don't think too much about new gowns, Maisie, and nothing about Continental Counts. Live straight. I made old Conybeare put a simple stone over my grave, but if you approve it, you can put a big marble monument in Little Diddington Church to my memory and another to your father's. If the man that carves them can manage it, I'd like him to convey—gracefully—that I'd made my bit in pork. I dare say he could do it. I could like that monument—it's the only vanity I have. Well, I guess that's all. Be good children.—Your uncle,

“‘NATHANIEL.’”

“What an extraordinary thing!” exclaimed Maisie, as they reread the letter some time later. “I do wish we had seen him, though, Dick. I'll take good care to follow his advice, if only for his sake, for I'm sure he's been more than kind to us. But then there isn't any temptations for me in Continental Counts, and I don't think there's much for you in race-horses, is there, Dick? No. I think Uncle Nathaniel would quite have approved of Chris, don't you, Dick?”

“Oh, I should say decidedly so!” replied Goulburn. “Chris is a smart business man—he'll get on.”

“I wonder whom you'll marry, Dick?” she said. “Do you know, I believe you're somewhat impressed by the girl next door—eh?”

“Nonsense, Maisie!” said Goulburn, giving her an affectionate shake as she nestled against him. “You're such a soft, pussy-cat sort of young party yourself,

always thinking about love and its kindred worries. And which of the young ladies next door, pray?"

For there had already been several interchanges of hospitalities between the occupants of the black house and the new inmates of the white, and Miss Maisie Goulburn was as conversant with Dr. van Mildart's establishment as her brother was.

"Now that's silly, Dick!" she said. "You know very well I mean Miss Phillimore. Haven't you been riding with her every morning this week?"

"I don't see anything very much in that," answered Goulburn, "seeing that we're next-door neighbours."

"So is Miss Lamotte—who is very handsome, much handsomer than Miss Phillimore—a next-door neighbour, but you don't take her riding," said Maisie.

"I don't know that Miss Lamotte does ride," replied Goulburn, "and——"

"Oh yes, she does!" interrupted Maisie. "I saw her go out the other morning with Dr. van Mildart. I say, Dick, don't you think Dr. van Mildart and Miss Lamotte are a queer pair?"

Goulburn turned a pair of astonished eyes upon his sister.

"Queer pair?" he repeated. "What do you mean, child?"

"Well—queer. Queer—just queer."

"That is a sensible explanation," he said, laughing. "I don't see where they're queer. They're very clever. Look at van Mildart's practice!—Why, he must be making thousands upon thousands a year."

"Oh yes!" agreed Maisie. "There's no doubt about that: it's just amazing to see the carriages at his door every morning. And, by the bye, I didn't tell you, Dick, that I'd been a patient of his to-day."

"You, a patient of his! What do you mean, Maisie?"

"Well, when you were out this afternoon—I've a shrewd suspicion, sir, that you were out with Moira—I went out, meaning to do some shopping in Bond Street. But as I was crossing Cavendish Square I had an attack of neuralgia—right there, in the old place—and it was so excruciating that I turned back home to get some drops. Just as I reached our house Dr. van Mildart came out of his—his car was waiting. He saw me, and hurried up: 'You look to be in pain, Miss Goulburn,' he said. 'I'm in awful pain, Dr. van Mildart,' I replied. 'It's neuralgia.' 'Come into my house,' he said. 'I'll cure you in a minute.' He took me into the dining-room; never bothered to close the door nor even to take off his hat or gloves or lay down his umbrella. 'Now,' he said, 'stand there—just so—and look straight and hard at my spectacles until I speak to you.' In what seemed to me to be at once he laughed and said, 'You've no neuralgia—it's all gone.' And so it had, Dick—completely."

Goulburn frowned a little—the frown of a man who doesn't like things that he doesn't understand.

"I don't exactly like that, Maisie," he said. "Seems to me like—well, like what they used to call black magic. I suppose it's what they now call hypnotic suggestion. By George! it's a dangerous power to

have. Think what awful uses it might be put to in the hands of the unscrupulous!"

"Oh yes, but Dr. van Mildart is all right," said Maisie. "He's a nice, kind little man, and not a bit like a doctor."

"Why, you said just now he was queer," laughed Goulburn. "Didn't you?"

"He is queer," said Maisie. "So is Miss Lamotte. And so is Pimperry."

Goulburn lighted another cigar and finished his coffee.

"Pimperry!" he exclaimed. "I should think Pimperry is queer. He's the queerest man I've ever seen."

"Chris," remarked Maisie, "Chris says that he'd give a month's screw—whatever that may be, but I suppose it means salary—to know all about Pimperry. He says Pimperry has a past."

For Mr. Christopher Aspinall, first asked to dine at the black house as Miss Goulburn's fiancé, and subsequently because of that and his undoubted powers as a teller of tales and singer of humorous songs, had been as profoundly struck by the man with the dead eyes as his friend Goulburn, and had surreptitiously studied him whenever he got the chance.

"Well, if Chris says that, Chris must be impressed," commented Goulburn; "for, next to you, Master Christopher loves money."

"Dick darling!" said Maisie, "do tell his own sister if he is in love with Moira of the chestnut hair. Because his own sister thinks that Moira is really in love with him."

But Mr. Richard Goulburn was not to be drawn even by this tempting bait. In his own mind he had no doubt whatever as to the state of his feelings towards Miss Moira Phillimore, but he was not going to make even Maisie his confidante—just yet. He and Moira were now constantly together, and it was very plain to outside observers that they enjoyed each other's society. Goulburn had set up what for a man of his income was really a very modest establishment in the way of horses and carriages, he had always been fond of riding and driving as a boy in the country,—and his favourite occupation now was riding in the Park with Moira in the morning or taking her long drives into the country in the afternoon. Each, old-fashioned as it seemed, preferred horse-flesh to petrol as a means of locomotion, each became adept at discovering quiet lanes where the hedgerows were as yet left unsmothered by dust. He never quite understood at this time what Miss Phillimore's exact attitude towards her uncle, Dr. van Mildart, was, for she rarely spoke of him except as regarded his tremendous ability as a specialist in cases of nervous disease. Of that Goulburn needed no assurance—the fame of van Mildart was all over London, and the fashionable world flocked to his door. It was well known that the credentials of both himself and his assistant were unimpeachable—both, in addition to American degrees, were fully qualified medical practitioners in England; and the most jealous of his confrères could not describe van Mildart as a quack, however much they canvassed his

methods. His clientele was, naturally, chiefly composed of women, whose tired and jangled nerves he seemed to possess some rare secret of composing. That he charged huge fees was well known; it was well known also that he was inflexible in his rules. He would see no one, do nothing, after four o'clock in the afternoon; the rest of his day, he said, was for his own pleasure. He was fond of society in his own house, but steadily refused all invitations from the fashionable world, who would have lionised him. He was just a plain man, he said laughingly; and if he cured great lords and ladies, that was no reason why he should dance attendance on them. He liked to be at home with his own friends.

Of these friends the new inmates next door soon became part and parcel. The people of the black house frequently dined with the people of the white house; the white house people went in and out of the black house as they would. Never was there such a genial host as Dr. van Mildart nor so entertaining a one. He seemed to take a fancy to the two young people who had so suddenly, and by such a curious twist of fortune's wheel, come into his life, and he was certainly interested in and amused by Christopher Aspinall, whom he was perpetually advising to go upon the stage or adopt the music-halls as a profession.

Goulburn, intent on his love-making, had almost forgotten the extraordinary note which he had found in his ticket-pocket on the night of his return from his first visit to Dr. van Mildart's. Once or twice, happen-

ing to catch Pimpery's lack-lustre eyes when he was dining there, he had wondered whether that extraordinary individual had had anything to do with it. And once, when they had become more intimate, he had ventured to remark on the butler's weird appearance to van Mildart. The doctor had taken the remark quite casually, and had merely replied, "Ah, yes, poor Pimpery—a faithful servant, but certainly odd in appearance," and had said no more.

But towards the end of July, when they were all seriously considering the question of leaving town and debating where to go, something happened which set up strange fears in Goulburn's mind, and subsequently in the somewhat more active and suspicious one of Mr. Christopher Aspinall. Goulburn was sitting in his smoking-room one morning smoking an after-breakfast cigarette when Maisie entered with a face which was more scared than troubled. She held out a volume which Goulburn instantly recognised as her bank pass-book.

"What's the matter, Maisie?" he asked.

"I don't know what's the matter, Dick," she answered; "but either something serious is the matter, or the bank people have made a horrible mistake. See, look at this: I'm debited, date July 21, with an entry of a thousand pounds! How ridiculous! As if I should ever have occasion to draw a cheque for that amount. All my cheques have been for small amounts—dress-makers, shoemakers, milliners, and so on. What do they mean by saying that I ever drew a thousand pounds?"

"Let me look," said Goulburn, and ran his eye down

the debit side of the pass-book. "Yes, that's right," he said. "They must have made a mistake. Fetch your cheque-book, Maisie."

Maisie passed into the library, which adjoined the smoking-room, and Goulburn heard her unlock a cabinet in which she kept her private account books and papers. And then he heard her utter a slight scream of astonishment and surprise, and, throwing his newspaper aside, ran to her.

"Now, Maisie," he said, "what have you discovered?"

She was standing holding her open cheque-book at arm's length, staring at a counterfoil in it with dilated eyes.

"Look, Dick!" she whispered, as if she were frightened. "Look, it's there—the counterfoil. See—July 21, 1908. Self, one thousand pounds. My writing! And—I don't remember anything about it!"

Now it so happened that Christopher Aspinall, just then starting out on his annual three weeks' holiday, was spending the first few days of it with his friends, and at that moment he entered the library, to find both of them in a state of extreme discomposure. To him Goulburn narrated the strange facts which had just come to light. Chris's usually smiling face became extremely grave, and he vented his feelings in a long, low whistle.

"I say, you know," he said, "there's something wrong here. You're sure that's your writing, Maisie?"

"I'm certain it is!" answered Maisie.

"And you could swear to your own signature on the cheque that's been torn from this if it's produced to you?" asked Chris.

"Yes, I'm sure I could, because I always give a peculiar little twiddle to one of the letters in it," she replied.

"Then," said Chris, "the best thing to do is to go straight to the bank and find out when and by whom that cheque was cashed."

"We will all go," said Goulburn. "Get your things on, Maisie, while I order the brougham. That's a queer thing, Chris," he continued, when Maisie had left the room. "What can it mean?"

"Ah!" said Chris. "Just so—I quite apprehend the wisdom of your remark. Wait till we get to the bank."

As both brother and sister kept considerable sums at that particular bank, they were always received there with great attention, and on this occasion Goulburn's request to be favoured with an immediate interview with the manager was at once granted. But the interview, very brief and very much to the point, was eminently unsatisfactory. There was not the slightest doubt—as the manager quickly proved to them—that on the morning of the 21st of that month Miss Goulburn called in person at the bank, presented her own cheque for one thousand pounds, and requested to be paid in gold. The gold was packed in parcels of two hundred pounds each and placed by herself in a hand-bag which she produced and which the cashier remembered seeing her initials upon. The evidence was

quite clear, and as the manager showed the three out, he drew Goulburn aside and suggested that his sister might have been suffering from a little temporary aberration, and that he would do well to consult a medical man.

Outside, Goulburn went up to their coachman on the impulse of the moment—a thought had struck him.

“Jarvis, do you remember bringing Miss Goulburn to the bank about a week ago on an occasion when she came out with a rather heavy bag?”

“Yes, sir—quite well.”

“Where did you drive her afterwards?”

“Straight home, sir.”

The brother and sister and Christopher Aspinall looked at each other with blank faces and reëntered the brougham in silence.

CHAPTER V
THE COUNTESS OF MAXTON'S
DIAMONDS

ONCE within the safe shelter of the brougham, Maisie not unnaturally gave way to tears; Goulburn and Christopher, after the fashion of mere men in such cases, looked at each other in miserable helplessness.

"Don't cry, Maisie," said Goulburn. "It's not your fault that this thing has happened, and all the crying in the world won't do you any good. Let's try to get at the root of the mystery."

"Yes; but that's what I'm crying about," said Maisie. "I wouldn't mind if it were not for the mystery. It's the mystery that hurts. Why, if I could do a thing like that and never know anything about it, I'm more fitted for an asylum than a private house! I must be mad!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Chris, who was looking very fierce and determined, and much disposed to have words with somebody or anybody. "You're all right, Maisie. Perhaps—er—perhaps you were a bit forgetful that day—might have got some notion into your head that you wanted a thousand pounds in gold—say, just to look at, eh?—and went and got it, and then hid it some-

where, and forgot where you'd put it. I've heard of such things—oh, hundreds of times!" concluded Chris, with great emphasis, and staring Goulburn in the face with unblushing effrontery. "Haven't you, Dick?"

"Yes—I've heard of cases in which people have mislaid things," said Goulburn, who was not one-half as quick as his friend Christopher at apprehending a situation; "but in this case——"

"In this case it's all nonsense!" interrupted Maisie, who was drying her tears and regaining her customary composure. "I'm surprised at you, Chris, for suggesting such things. I say that since I did go to the bank and draw that money—for we can't doubt that I did on the face of the evidence—and have not the slightest recollection of ever having done so, there must be something wrong with me mentally, and I insist on seeing Dr. van Mildart at once and telling him all about it. Why, I might go on drawing my whole fortune and throwing it into the Thames!"

The two men made no immediate reply to this, but after a while Goulburn said gently—

"Don't you think, Maisie, that when we get home you'd better have a look round and see if you can't find that gold?"

"Yes—before going to any doctors," said Chris fervently. "I should suggest a detective rather than a doctor."

Maisie flashed looks of indignant scorn upon both.

"I might be dealing with children instead of grown men!" she said. "Now, do you really fancy, Dick, that

I have got a thousand sovereigns carefully hidden away somewhere in the house, as if I were a jackdaw who steals anything bright for the mere pleasure of hiding it? Stuff! And as for you, Chris, with your silly chatter about detectives, I'm ashamed of you. You're perpetually forcing it upon one that you were meant to be a second Sherlock Holmes; but I'm sure I don't see where your perspicacity comes in in this case. What could a detective do? No! I must have been suffering from some temporary mental aberration, or something of that sort, and I'm going to see Dr. van Mildart as soon as we get home."

Now, although Maisie was just a small brown-eyed, brown-haired little woman who looked as if she ought to be perpetually petted and made much of, she had an iron will of her own, and no one knew it better than Richard and Christopher. They therefore kept silence until they were safely housed in Harley Street again, but as they were crossing the hall Goulburn said—

"Well, Maisie, if you're really going to see Dr. van Mildart, you might at least let Chris and me go with you. We're just as anxious about this affair as you are."

"Oh yes," she said, "you may come. I'll be ready in ten minutes, and we'll catch the doctor early."

Then she went up the stairs, and the two men turned into the smoking-room and stared hard at each other in a suggestive silence.

"I say, Dick," said Chris at last, "this is a queer business. There's some foul play in this, my boy."

"Foul play? Nonsense, Chris! How could there be foul play?"

"Don't know," answered Chris, as he lighted a cigarette, "but I'll bet there is. It's all very well Maisie making light of my powers, but I have the detective genius in many ways, and I'll bet all I possess there's something wrong in this—I mean from an outside source. And I don't see what good van Mildart can possibly do."

"Well, he might do some good in one way," said Goulburn thoughtfully. "I've found out that he has the power to hypnotise Maisie, and——"

"What!" exclaimed Chris. "The power to hypnotise Maisie? Good heavens! you don't mean to say that you allowed that, Dick?"

"My dear fellow," said Goulburn, who perceived that the little man was genuinely concerned by this news, "there's nothing to be alarmed about. It was not a question of my allowing it or not—as a matter of fact, I knew absolutely nothing about it. Maisie happened to have a frightful attack of neuralgia—she met van Mildart—he saw that she was in pain, took her into his dining-room, and cured her instantly by what, from her account, was nothing more nor less than hypnotic suggestion. That's all."

"And what did he do?" inquired Chris suspiciously.

"Merely told her to stand still and look fixedly at his spectacles until he spoke to her. In about a minute he told her that she hadn't got neuralgia—that it was gone. And so it was."

"And pray how can van Mildart help us in this matter?" inquired Chris.

"Well, I thought that if he hypnotised her he could get out of her all about this bank mystery," answered Goulburn. "I should think he could—I've heard of such things."

"I'll take good care he doesn't, then!" exclaimed Chris. "Look here, Dick, you may be Maisie's brother,—or, rather, you are her brother,—but I'm going to be her husband, and I'm dashed if I'm going to have van Mildart or anybody else playing hanky-panky tricks with my future wife! He'd no business to hypnotise Maisie—neuralgia or no neuralgia. It's a beastly dangerous——"

"Will you please come to the telephone, sir?" said the parlour-maid, entering the smoking-room and addressing Goulburn.

When his host had left the room Mr. Christopher Aspinall's behaviour became quite strange, not to say eccentric and peculiar. He ruffled his hair. He put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and twiddled his fingers. He seized the point of his chin in his left hand and stared fixedly at the ceiling. He rubbed the tip of his turned-up nose violently with the forefinger of his right hand. Then he varied these proceedings by walking round the room with slow steps and bent head. Coming to a sudden stop in front of the window, he suddenly lifted a face into which the light of a startling idea had come, and, smiting his left palm with his right fist, he said in a low, thrilling voice—

"By Gad!"

After which, presumably by way of relieving his feelings, he gave vent to a long, low whistle, in the midst of which Maisie entered, followed a second later by her brother.

"Come along, boys," said Maisie. "Let's go round to Dr. van Mildart to find out if I am a fit subject for Hanwell or Colney Hatch. You need not come if you don't want to, Christopher."

But Christopher displayed great eagerness to go.

"Oh, ah, yes, I'm coming, I'm coming, Maisie," he said. "I—I've been thinking it over, and I'm sure, I'm certain, that you're very wise. Yes, it's the right thing to do. Yes, let's go and see Dr. van Mildart at once."

However, as luck would have it, they found out, on reaching the door of the black house, that the famous specialist was not to be seen. He had gone out of town very early that morning and would not return until afternoon. But Miss Lamotte was in, and Miss Lamotte (it being still rather an early hour for the usual crowd of fashionable callers) was disengaged.

"I will see Miss Lamotte," said Maisie, with sudden determination, and without evincing the least desire to consult brother or fiancé.

Miss Lamotte, interviewed professionally, proved to be a very different person to the Miss Lamotte of social life. She was very business-like, very precise, and very grave. Entirely ignoring the two men, who found themselves sitting in faraway chairs nursing their walking-sticks, she began to question Maisie in sharp,

trenchant fashion, consulting from time to time a small notebook in which she had set down the girl's statement.

"You have not the slightest recollection of this matter, Miss Goulburn?"

"Not the very slightest—it is all a blank to me. I know nothing of it."

"Can you remember anything at all about that particular day—July 21?"

"Oh yes, lots about it! I have just been looking in my diary—I jot little things down in it, you know, quite little things. These are several things in it: I called at two or three shops in the morning—my brother and I lunched at the Ritz—you and Miss Phillimore came to tea in the afternoon—my brother, Mr. Aspinall, and I were at the theatre at night."

"And the previous evening—do you remember anything of that?"

"Yes; we dined here the previous evening. I remember that very well, because while you and Miss Phillimore and my brother and Mr. Aspinall were playing bridge, Dr. van Mildart showed me his cabinet of Byzantine coins which I had been so wanting to see. Oh yes, I remember that evening clearly—and, in fact, everything all along. I never remember a lapse of memory before."

"But you had been, I think, a little run down?"

"Perhaps I had. But of late I have felt so well. What is it, do you think, Miss Lamotte?"

But Miss Lamotte was making more notes in her

little book, and for the moment did not reply. When she did, her tones were as business-like as before.

"I don't think you need be alarmed, Miss Goulburn," she said. "Possibly it was some little temporary aberration, a thing that every one is subject to. Why should it take that form? Ah!—why indeed? Perhaps the sight of Dr. van Mildart's gold coins played some trick with your brain, and made you want to possess something bright and glittering. Don't worry—you will be all right."

Maisie made a half-childish mouth.

"Don't like it," she said.

"No!" said Chris, who could no longer be restrained from speaking. "And I don't like it either! Have you ever known cases of this sort before, may I ask, Miss Lamotte?"

Miss Lamotte turned a severely professional glance upon the interrupter.

"Oh yes, several!" she said icily. Then, turning to Maisie, she repeated her previous admonition: "Don't worry!"

"Yes," said Maisie, "but I can't help worrying. You see, Miss Lamotte, it might occur again."

"No," said Miss Lamotte, "I don't think it will."

"You think, Miss Lamotte, that it was a mere passing phase?" said Goulburn. "A temporary——"

"Just so," said Miss Lamotte. "I advise your sister not to worry about it."

"But supposing it does happen again?" insisted Maisie. "I might lost a great deal more at that time."

Miss Lamotte glanced at Goulburn.

"You might prevent that by allowing your brother to take charge of your cheque-book," she said.

Maisie shrugged her shoulders.

"It's all very dreadful," she said. "Besides, where is my thousand pounds? It can't have melted, and I'm sure I haven't hidden it, or buried it, or given it away."

"Pardon me, but you don't know that," said Miss Lamotte; "you don't know what you mayn't have done with it. Don't worry!—wait until Dr. van Mildart returns, and then, if you like, speak to him. But he will tell you, in effect, what I am telling you."

"Well, I suppose that is all I can do," said Maisie, somewhat discontentedly, and showing an evident disappointment that Miss Lamotte could not immediately solve all her difficulties. "But——"

At that moment the door of Miss Lamotte's private consulting room was opened without ceremony, and Moira Phillimore, looking considerably excited, and waving a newspaper, burst in upon them.

"I say, Miss Lamotte——!" she began. Then, stopping short and glancing about her, "What on earth are all you people doing here?" she said. "I thought Miss Lamotte was alone—it's half an hour to her private audiences yet. Is some one ill?"

"Maisie is not very well," said Goulburn.

"And I'm not at all what I should be," said Chris pathetically. "I wish I felt as well as you look, Miss Phillimore."

"Then my looks must belie my feelings, Mr. Aspi-

nail, for I don't feel too well myself," said Moira. "I suppose it's the weather. We really must get out of London. But I rushed in to tell Miss Lamotte the news—I know she never reads the newspapers until evening. I say, Miss Lamotte, you know the Countess of Maxton—that baby-eyed, fluffy-haired, dolly-woman who has been consulting my Uncle van Mildart so often lately?"

"Yes, of course," replied Miss Lamotte.

"All her diamonds have been stolen!"

Christopher Aspinnall let forth a sharp whistle.

"What!" he exclaimed. "The famous Maxton diamonds!"

"Oh, you know something about them, do you?" said Moira. "Yes, the famous Maxton diamonds—clean disappeared!"

"Why, they're worth every penny of two hundred thousand pounds," said Chris.

"Two hundred and seventy-five thousand, according to the paper," said Moira. "Look here!"

She held up a newspaper as she spoke, and they, gathering round her, saw the announcement of the theft in big black letters.

GREAT JEWEL ROBBERY.

THE COUNTESS OF MAXTON'S DIAMONDS STOLEN.

THE FAMOUS "MAXTON STAR."

TOTAL LOSS: £275,000.

"That," said Moira, "is quite a lively heading—much more lively than is usual in English newspapers. But the thieves must have been clever. Here, Mr. Christopher Aspinall, as you revel so in crime, and think yourself so clever, read the terrible details to the company. I know they'll interest Miss Lamotte."

"Why me particularly?" asked Miss Lamotte.

"Oh, I know. I'm pretty smart at knowing what interests people," said Moira, seating herself on the edge of the lady-doctor's desk, and playing a tattoo on it with her fingers. "Read, Mr. Christopher, read!"

"Ahem!" said Chris, taking the stage in approved fashion. "Thus it runs:—

"‘A jewel robbery of an exceptionally daring nature was reported to the authorities at Scotland Yard late last evening. The information so far supplied to the press is of very scanty nature, the police being naturally reticent in the matter; but it may be stated at once that the famous Maxton family jewels, including the world-celebrated “Maxton Star,” have been stolen, and are now in the hands of what is probably a remarkably clever gang of thieves.

"‘The facts of the robbery as communicated to the press are as follows: The Maxton jewels when in London have always been kept in the Earl of Maxton's private safe at his bankers', a well-known house in the city; and whenever they have been taken out or deposited, it has been by either Lord or Lady Maxton in person. They were always contained in a stout leather

box about eighteen inches square, which was secured by an ordinary patent lock, was clamped with brass at the corners, and had a handle by which it was carried.

“There was occasion for the use of the jewels again last evening, when the Earl and Countess were to attend the Duchess of Richminster’s dance at Richminster House. As on all previous occasions, they were fetched from the bank in person—this time by the Earl. On the case being opened about nine o’clock last night, it was found to contain a quantity of lead, of tissue paper, and cotton-wool.

“On the 25th inst., Lord and Lady Maxton giving a dinner and reception in honour of the Grand Duke of Friedstein, the jewels were fetched from the bank by Lady Maxton herself, and were worn by her that night. They were kept in a safe in his lordship’s dressing-room (and it may here be stated that, following the usual custom, his lordship himself saw the jewels safely deposited in the case, himself locked them up and kept the key, and that the key has never since been out of his possession) for the rest of the night, and at eleven o’clock next morning were taken to the bank by the Countess, who deposited them in the private safe in the presence of the manager.

“The mystery of the matter is at present literally inexplicable. The coachman who drove the carriage which conveyed the Countess and the jewels to the bank on the morning of the 26th inst. is positive that no break was made in the journey at any place, and the

footman corroborates his statement. Both servants agree that the Countess passed into the bank carrying the case. The bank manager, hastily interviewed at a late hour last night, says that the Countess proceeded straight to his office, and that the case was deposited, as usual, in the private safe in his presence.

“The value of the missing diamonds is, roughly speaking, about £275,000. All are family heirlooms, with the exception of a necklace which was given by the present Earl to his wife on their marriage.’”

“I think that’s one of the smartest things I’ve heard of for a long time,” said Moira, as Chris made an end of the newspaper account. “Don’t you think so too, Miss Lamotte?”

Miss Lamotte coughed—a deprecating sort of cough.

“Really, I don’t know anything about such matters,” she said. “It seems very strange to me that the diamonds could be abstracted at all if the facts are as the newspaper says. It is a very remarkable case.”

“It is a most remarkable case,” agreed Chris, with a judicial air. “Now I have given some slight attention to these affairs, and——”

But before Christopher could ventilate his theories the door of the consulting room was opened, and the parlour-maid announced—

“Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith and Miss Georgina Ponsonby-Smith to see Miss Lamotte by appointment.”

As Miss Lamotte’s patients (or patient in charge of

a doting mamma) sailed into the room the four young people went out of it. In the hall Moira looked at Maisie.

"Are you coming upstairs?" she asked, somewhat abruptly, "or was it just a professional call?"

"Quite professional," replied Maisie. "I wanted to know whether I am going mad or not. And I've such a lot to do this morning. Come along, Christopher."

"Well, you're all dining here to-night, aren't you?" said Moira. "*Au revoir!*"

Maisie and Chris tripped down the steps together; Goulburn lingered, looking at Moira, who was gazing abstractedly at a recessed bronze figure. She turned and looked at him with half-shut eyes.

"Well?" she said.

"You don't seem well," he said anxiously.

"I'm not well, I'm anything but well. I want to yawn all day long. Do you want to smoke? Come into the library—it's cool there."

She led the way into the room in which Goulburn had first met Dr. van Mildart, and flung herself into one of the easy-chairs with a heavy sigh.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," she said. "Of late I'm so tired all day. I suppose, of course, it's nothing but the heat. I don't like the English climate. I think I shall go back to the States and settle down there."

"You don't mean that?" he said, with something of a tremor in his voice.

"Frankly, I do mean it," she said. "Why should I

not mean it? I'm not given to saying things that I don't mean."

"No, indeed," he exclaimed. "But——"

"Well?"

"If you go, I shall follow you there," said Goulburn, in a low voice.

She regarded him calmly for a time and then nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "I expect you would."

"You know I should. You know very well I love you!" he burst out.

Once more she regarded him calmly; once more nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "I know."

He came nearer to her, bent over her.

"And you?" he whispered.

She did not look at him for a while, but at last she gave him one quick glance that set his blood on fire.

"Yes, I expect it's so with me too," she said. "No, don't want to kiss me now—please. I'm—I'm troubled."

"Troubled! You?"

"Yes, I."

"What is it? Tell me, please."

"Not yet. But I will tell you later. Look here, will you go away now? I want to be alone—to think. You will see me to-night."

"Answer me one question," said Goulburn: "are you going to marry me, Moira?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then said—

"If I answer you, will you promise to march straight

away out of that door without another word? We can talk to-night."

"I promise faithfully."

"Very well: yes."

Goulburn carried out his promise, but was never afterwards quite sure how he did it. Nor was he quite sure how he spent the remainder of the day except that he visited several jewellers' shops in Bond Street, selecting an engagement ring, on which he spent a sum that would have purchased a small estate. It seemed hours before evening arrived, and they were all re-assembled within Dr. van Mildart's hospitable walls.

The doctor had never been so genial or so talkative. His attention had been called to the Maxton Diamond Case, and he discoursed learnedly upon similar occurrences. He was still talking on the subject to Goulburn and Christopher over their coffee and cigars in the library when Pimpery suddenly opened the door and announced—

"The Earl and Countess of Maxton!"

CHAPTER VI

LOOKING INTO THE UNSEEN

DON'T go away, you boys," said Dr. van Mildart, in a rapid aside to Goulburn and Christopher as Pimperry ushered the visitors into the library. "Stay where you are, and you will have some fun."

The Countess of Maxton came into the room as if she were the heroine of some transpontine melodrama—that is to say, she made a rapid entry in tragic and perfect silence, with outstretched arms and clasped hands, her eyes full of tears, her face distraught with grief, her whole attitude that of a penitent suing for mercy at the knees of an irate parent. Coming to within a foot or two of Dr. van Mildart, she wrung her hands and rolled her eyes towards the ceiling.

"Oh, Dr. van Mildart!" she burst out. "Oh, Dr. van Mildart! Pardon this intrusion—so abrupt—so untimely; but you have, of course, heard our terrible news. Can you not give us some advice?—you, who are so clever, who know so much. We are in the deepest distress. Aren't we, Freddie dear? Freddie, this is Dr. van Mildart."

"How d'yer do—how d'yer do!" said the Earl of Maxton, who had followed closely upon his wife's

heels, and was now struggling to fix a monocle in his right eye. "Awfully pleased, I'm sure. D'lighted if you could give us a tip about gettin' on to those infern—chaps, you know, who've got our diamonds. Monstrous bad business, you know, losin' diamonds worth two-fifty thou'. Heirlooms too, begad!"

"Except the dear darling necklace you gave me when we were married, Freddie dear!" said Lady Maxton.

"Oh, ah, yes, of course," assented Lord Maxton, in tones which seemed to imply that he didn't attach very much importance to that particular fact.

"If your ladyship will be seated," said Dr. van Mildart, drawing forward his most comfortable—and appropriate—chair. "Pray, my lord, take a seat. Yes," he continued, "I have read some account of your loss in the newspapers—it is indeed a very serious matter, and a most mysterious one. I cannot understand it."

"'Zactly what I say," said the Earl. "Doosed queer, I call it. Licks anythin' I ever heard of, eh? Saw the confounded things safely locked up with me own eyes, begad! Didn't I, Dolly?"

"You did, Freddie," assented Lady Maxton, "you did."

"Course I did. With me own eyes. Can't doubt yer own eyes, can yah?" said the Earl, who, having succeeded in fixing his monocle, now glared all round about him as if anxious to encounter some one who would dare to contradict him. His glance fell upon Goulburn and Christopher, and he screwed up his other eye in an

effort to see them more clearly. "Friends of yours?" he said, turning to Dr. van Mildart.

"My friend Mr. Richard Goulburn and Mr. Christopher Aspinall," said the doctor, with a ceremonious bow.

"How d'yer do—how d'yer do!" said Lord Maxton. "Beastly hot weather, ain't it? Time we all got out o' this—I want to get a bit o' salmon-fishin' in before the twelfth. Small chance o' that now, though. Confounded p'lice say we shall have to stop in town awhile longer, begad!"

Lady Maxton heaved a profound sigh, and, conscious of an audience, fell into a pathetic attitude.

"Well, there's nothing but trouble in this world, Freddie," she said. "We all have our share of it, and it must be borne with patience."

It seemed to Mr. Christopher Aspinall, who had something of a weakness for studying the peerage, that if anybody's paths had ever been made smooth for them it was the two creatures whom he was now studying with as much curiosity as an entomologist studies a new specimen of the beetle tribe. The Right Honourable Charles William Frederick Fitzwalter, tenth Earl of Maxton, was one of the wealthiest, as he was also one of the most amiably stupid, members of the peerage. A big, fair-haired, mild-blue-eyed, fresh-coloured, open-mouthed, high-nosed, small-chinned giant of six feet, he could scarcely spell or write his own name, and certainly never read anything but Ruff's Guide and the

sporting newspapers. He had taken his seat in the House of Lords on his succession to the title, and had solemnly vowed, on his return from that ceremony, that he would never enter the infernal place again unless he was absolutely compelled to. He would have been hard put to it to tell you, if questioned off-hand, which political party was in power, and would certainly have fallen asleep if you had read him a leader out of the *Times*. But he could handle the ribbons as cleverly as Selby, himself; had shot big game in Canada and tigers in India; was well known in the Shires as one of the boldest and straightest of riders; had done some noteworthy things in salmon-fishing; and was undeniably one of the best judges of horse-flesh (more by instinct than by scientific knowledge) in England. His manners were usually those of a superior stable-boy, and he was as dense as any rustic on his numerous estates so far as all the finer things of life went; but he was kindly-hearted, simple and unaffected.

As for the Countess of Maxton, whom her husband had married out of a country parsonage wherein he had spent some weeks with a broken leg, she was as well known in London as the lions in Trafalgar Square. As she had no children she went in for fads. Sometimes it was this, sometimes it was that. She had invented two new dances and an original riding habit. She had instituted several sorts of social reform amongst the poor, and had once lived a whole week in two rooms in Bethnal Green. She had given her approval and patronage to various forms of fancy religion, and had

upon one occasion introduced to society an Eastern prophet who finally disappeared with a goodly amount of portable property from the Earl's town residence. The Earl, who was genuinely fond of her in his way, let her do exactly what she pleased. Her present fad was to study what she called the emotion of the nervous system, and Dr. van Mildart was her prophet. She had no guile in her, and was nothing more nor less than a fluffy-haired, feather-brained, pretty little fool.

"But I do not see what I can do to help you, Lady Maxton," Dr. van Mildart was saying.

Lady Maxton regarded the doctor with the air of a devotee.

"Oh, but you are so clever, Dr. van Mildart!" she said. "I'm sure you can do something for us if you only will. Couldn't you suggest who it is that has stolen the diamonds?"

"My dear lady!" exclaimed the doctor, "I have not the power of seeing into the unknown."

"'Zactly what I said," remarked the Earl. "Told you so, Dolly. Quite impossible to expect medical man to do such a thing."

Lady Maxton, however, was not satisfied. She made a little mouth, expressive of disappointment.

"Ah, but you do believe in second-sight, and thought-reading, and crystal-gazing, and all that sort of thing, doctor, now don't you?" she said. "And just look how you cured me of the most frightful headache one day by merely telling me that I hadn't got it!"

"That," said Dr. van Mildart, "is quite another matter."

Lady Maxton twisted her rings round and round her slim fingers.

"I believe you could suggest something if you liked to do so," she said. "The police are so stupid—aren't they, Freddie?"

"Awful rotters," agreed Lord Maxton. "Don't believe they'll ever find anything out. Clean sweep, yah know. Doosed queer, all the same."

Dr. van Mildart, who had been walking about the library as if in deep thought, came to a halt in front of Lady Maxton, and spoke.

"I will tell you what I can do, Lady Maxton," he said—"that is, if you and Lord Maxton really wish it. I know a medium who is decidedly clairvoyant, and whom I have known to do some very remarkable things. If she can get any insight, she might be able to tell you something. She lives close by here—shall I send for her? What does your lordship say?"

"Oh, I don't mind!" answered the Earl. "Don't believe in that sort of thing meself, yah know—all fudge, in my opinion. However, don't say other people don't see something in it. Dolly there does—eh?"

"Oh yes, do let us have this medium, Dr. van Mildart!" exclaimed Lady Maxton. "I shall love it. And she may tell us something. Freddie is a dear old stupid about such things, but I'm not. Why, I once saw some wonderful things by looking into a crystal—quite astonishing. Do send for the lady at once."

"Very well," said the doctor. "I will telephone for her. In the meantime, Lady Maxton, I will fetch my niece, Miss Phillimore, and my assistant, Miss Lamotte, whom you know. But you must understand that I cannot guarantee that this lady can tell you anything—we shall see."

When Moira and Miss Lamotte came to the library the seven people left there during the doctor's absence at the telephone formed themselves into couples as if by instinct, Maisie, Christopher, and the Earl made common cause in one corner; Lady Maxton and Miss Lamotte in another; Goulburn and Moira got together in the deep window looking into the conservatory.

"What is going on?" she asked, in a low voice. "Something unusual?"

"Lady Maxton wants your uncle to give her some sort of supernatural help about her lost diamonds," he answered. "He has sent for a medium, who is, he says, very clever, to see if she can give Lady Maxton any satisfaction."

"Do you believe in that sort of thing?" asked Moira. Goulburn shook his head.

"No," he said, "frankly, I don't. But really I know nothing about it, so perhaps I am wrong in saying that I don't. I ought to know more of it before saying that I believe or not."

"I hate anything of that sort!" she said vehemently. "I never could bear it—it seems wicked to me. I don't even like hypnotism. By the bye, you know that my uncle is a very skilful hypnotist?"

"Yes," replied Goulburn. "He cured Maisie of neuralgia by what I suppose was hypnotic suggestion."

"Cured Maisie! I did not know that," she said, looking, he thought, a little uncomfortable as well as surprised. "It is a tremendous power to possess," she added reflectively.

"Yes," agreed Goulburn. "Fancy how it might be abused. But never mind that now—when can I see you, Moira, alone?"

"To-morrow, I suppose," she answered. "Take me somewhere, and then we can talk."

"I want to know what you meant this morning," he said. "You seemed to me to be troubled."

"I am uneasy about something," she admitted. "We will speak of it to-morrow—see, here is my uncle with his medium. What an odd-looking creature!"

Dr. van Mildart reëntered the room in company with a young woman of apparently eight-and-twenty years of age, and of an appearance which could scarcely have failed to excite comment and attract attention wherever she went. She was a good deal above the average height, and of a remarkable degree of thinness; her garments, fashioned in very æsthetic style, clung about her as draperies would cling about a stick. Her face, very long and pale, was chiefly noticeable for the largeness of her eyes, which were dark and shadowy and set far back beneath her level brows, over which a profusion of black hair fell negligently. She was so very thin, and so gliding in her movements, that she looked as much like a ghost as a human being, and

created an uncanny impression on such philistine minds as those of Lord Maxton and Goulburn, neither of whom had ever seen anything exactly like her before. As for Lady Maxton, she immediately evinced all the joys of a new sensation.

"Allow me to introduce Madame Astradente, Lady Maxton," said Dr. van Mildart.

"How do you do?" said Lady Maxton gushingly. "It's so good of you to try to help me, and I'm certain you're awfully clever. You can look into the unseen, can't you?"

Madame Astradente, who had replied to Lady Maxton's greeting with a cool and careless nod, sank into an easy-chair and disposed her draperies.

"At times—yes; at times—no," she replied, in a deep voice which was scarcely compatible with her extreme thinness.

"Oh, I hope you will be successful with me!" said Lady Maxton. "What will you do? Will you hold my hand, or put yours on my forehead, or gaze into a crystal, or what? I have had all those things done at one time or another, but I never had anything very serious told me."

"Give me your hand," said Madame Astradente. "I am acquainted with the facts of your case, and I wish to see if the presence of some inimical individuality in your chamber on the night of your loss has been impressed upon your mind and has left as it were a photograph of itself there."

"How clever!" said Lady Maxton, resigning her

bejewelled fingers. "Freddie—do you hear what she says? She thinks there must have been somebody hidden in my bedroom the other night."

"Rummy business altogether, begad!" commented Lord Maxton. "Of course, there might have been, yah know—lots o' places where a fellow could hide."

Lady Maxton shuddered with horror at the thought, while Madame Astradente, who was now holding her ladyship's right hand between both her own, fixed her great cavernous eyes on the ceiling, and seemed to look through it to the stars. The others came up and formed a group about these two. Madame took no notice of them. After some little time spent in holding Lady Maxton's hand and in contemplating the ceiling, she frowned and shook her head.

"It is strange," she said. "I am in a room, and yet I cannot see anything in it. There is something alive—human—in that room. But it is not your room, nor a bedroom at all. Ah, now I am beginning to see it—just as if one saw in the deepest twilight. It is a good-sized room with two windows, and there is a large dressing-table between them, and large clothes-presses around the walls. There is a big boot-rack with scores of pairs of boots and shoes."

"It's your dressing-room, Freddie!" said Lady Maxton, in an awestruck whisper.

"Begad, so it is, Dolly," replied the Earl. "Um! I wonder how she does it?"

"There is a stand, or a table, in a recess," continued

Madame Astradente, still seeking inspiration in the ceiling, "and on it there is a small safe."

"Quite right, quite right," commented the Earl. "So there is. Queer how she knows it, begad!"

Madame Astradente was silent for some little time, and her dark brows drew themselves into vertical lines. At last, when everybody was waiting in hushed silence to hear what she would say next—

"There is something materialising in the twilight," she said. "It is a hand—a human hand."

"A human hand! How awful!" said the Countess.

"I cannot see the body to which it belongs," continued Madame Astradente. "It is a woman's hand. It is on the door of the safe."

This announcement caused Lady Maxton to thrill with horror and Lord Maxton to fix his monocle more tightly in his eye in order that he might stare at Madame in astonishment.

"Now, I wonder whose hand that could have been?" he said. "A woman's, begad!"

"It is a very pretty, slender hand," Madam Astradente went on. "Ah, I can see more clearly now—yet I see nothing but the hand on the door of the safe. I——"

She suddenly withdrew her fixed gaze from the ceiling and looked round the circle of expectant faces with an air of surprised displeasure.

"Please to retire," she said icily. "What I have now to say is for her ladyship's ear alone."

When the audience had gone to its various corners, Madame Astradente bent toward the Countess and made a whispered communication to her, the effect of which was startling in the extreme. Lady Maxton gave voice to a slight scream, became very red and then very white, and almost snatched her hand away from the clairvoyant's grasp.

"Oh!" she said. "Impossible, Madame! Oh, Freddie, Freddie, come here at once. She says it was my hand she saw, because it had got that old iron ring that I always sleep in for luck."

"That is what I see," said Madame offendedly. "I know nothing of your ladyship's iron ring. I see a female hand on the door of a safe; on the third finger of it is an iron ring with the device of two circles intertwining within a square."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lady Maxton once more. "Oh—oh! That's my ring."

Madame Astradente shrugged her shoulders.

"I will retire," she said, glancing at the doctor. "I shall not see any more."

Dr. van Mildart came forward.

"Perhaps, Lady Maxton, you had put on your lucky ring before you placed the diamonds in their case in the safe?" he suggested. "The memory of your hand unlocking the safe may still linger strongly in your consciousness and lead Madame to see what she has described."

"But I never did put the jewels in the safe," said Lady Maxton, who was inclined towards tears. "Fred-

die did that—didn't you, Freddie? And I remember now that I didn't wear my iron ring that night because I was awfully tired and forgot it. And I don't want to hear any more, because it looks as if I were going to be accused of stealing my own diamonds when she says that she saw my hand on the safe; and somebody may think that I've got debts and things, and have had to pawn them or sell them; and I think we'll go home," she concluded, with a glance at Madame Astradente which that lady received with cold indifference.

"Don't seem to get much farther, cert'nly," said Lord Maxton. "Have to try back, I suppose. Queerest business I ever knew."

When the doctor had seen the Earl and Countess into their brougham and Madame Astradente into a cab, he returned to the library, to find that the three ladies had gone back to the drawing-room, and that Goulburn and Christopher were alone and thoughtful. Dr. van Mildart smiled upon them.

"I told you you would have some fun," he said.

Goulburn looked at his host with some curiosity.

"How much do you believe in that sort of thing, doctor?" he asked.

Dr. van Mildart stroked his beard meditatively.

"There are a great many psychic powers of which we know next to nothing," he said. "We are still on the very threshold."

"You think that Madame Astradente really saw a hand which she identified as Lady Maxton's?"

"I think that Lady Maxton was very probably

anxious about her jewels that night, and that it is quite possible that she left her bed and her room and went into her husband's dressing-room to feel if the safe was really locked, and that that fact had been so impressed upon her mind that it is still there, and could therefore be seen by Madame Astradente."

"But Lady Maxton says that she didn't wear the ring that night," remarked Chris.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Maxton is not a very well-dowered woman in either brains or memory," he said. "She probably slipped on her ring from mere force of habit. Women of her peculiar temperament often walk in their sleep."

"What do you think is the real secret of this robbery, doctor?" asked Chris. "I know you've studied that sort of thing."

Dr. van Mildart lighted a cigar and blew out a curling wisp of fragrant tobacco smoke.

"I'll tell you what I think of it," he said quietly. "I think it's the work of a brilliantly clever gang of criminals who will not be caught. You will see that the Maxton diamonds will never be heard of again. From what I read in the newspapers, it seems certain that there is no clue. The thing was as cleverly executed as it was cleverly planned."

"Wouldn't it seem as if some members of the gang had intimate knowledge of Lord Maxton's house and of his custom as regards keeping the diamonds in the safe when they were not at the bank?" asked Goulburn.

"Oh, I should say so," agreed the doctor. "It will be interesting to watch the doings of the police in this affair."

And then, yawning, as if he were tired of that subject, he began to talk about something else, and, having finished his cigar, proposed that they should go to the drawing-room for some music. He himself played the violin very finely, and Moira was a brilliant pianist.

"That is much better than bearing one's soul in patience while Lady Maxton vents her sillinesses upon one," he said smilingly, after he and Moira had played a duet.

"I dare say poor Lady Maxton doesn't consider it silly, though, to try to recover her diamonds," said Moira.

In this opinion Goulburn and Christopher were quite inclined to agree. When they had returned home that evening, and were sitting having a last cigarette together after Maisie had gone to bed, the Maxton diamond topic came up again, and Chris began to ventilate certain theories about it. Goulburn let him talk; it was one of his fads that he was a born investigator . . . "and that's what I should do if I were in charge of the case," Chris wound up a long suggestion with, "because—— Hello, Dick, what's the matter?"

Goulburn, who had just placed his hand in the left-hand pocket of his dinner jacket, where he carried a cigarette case, withdrew it, holding a triangular-shaped screw of paper. He uttered a sharp exclamation, for he had instantly recognised the material as akin to that

on which the mysterious note which he had received at his former lodgings had been written. He spread out the folded half-sheet—yes, there was the same handwriting. And this was the message:—

“SIR,—If you and your friend would like to know something about the house next door, turn out the lights in your smoking-room to-night at 11.30, and leave the French window open, so that One Who Knows can get in.”

Goulburn read this twice over, then passed it over to Christopher, who read it in his turn and whistled. He was already in possession of the story of the first note.

“What will you do, Dick?” he asked.

“Let him in, whoever he is,” answered Goulburn. “There’s some mystery about next door, Chris, and I’m going to have it settled—for Moira’s sake.”

“Ah—it’s come to that, has it?” said Chris. “Well, old chap, I’m with you. It’s close upon half-past eleven now.”

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half-hour.

“Turn down that light and stand by it, Chris,” said Goulburn. “I’ll turn this down and open the window. As soon as our visitor is safely within the room, up with your light to the full.”

The lights went down; Goulburn gently undid the fastenings of the French window. They waited in silence.

A minute passed; then a step, almost as light as a cat's, was heard outside; a man's figure was seen to slip gently into the room and to draw the curtain behind it.

Christopher turned up the light by which he stood. It revealed Dr. van Mildart's footman, William Service.

CHAPTER VII

MR. SERVICE SPEAKS

FOR a full moment after the man-servant had made his entry no one spoke. Christopher, his hand still holding the switch of the electric light which he had just turned on, stared open-mouthed at Service; Goulburn, who had never suspected the footman as the writer of the anonymous notes, was just as much surprised as Christopher. As for Service himself, he remained perfectly quiet, regarding first Goulburn and then Christopher with a patient submission which seemed to imply that it was not choice but stern necessity which had placed him in his present position.

Goulburn was the first to speak. He stepped over to the electric light which he had just turned off, switched it on, and swung round again to the footman.

"So it's you, Service," he said.

Service bowed his head respectfully.

"Yes, sir."

"And you who wrote me those notes?"

"Yes, sir."

Goulburn pointed to a chair.

"Well, I suppose you'd some object in doing so," he said. "Sit down. What is it that you have to tell us?"

Service glanced around about him—at the door, at the window.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but if you have no objection, I should wish to have both window and door secured. In my situation, sir, I am obliged to be most careful about my safety."

"Very good," answered Goulburn. He went behind the curtain through which Service had just slipped and made fast the window; then, crossing the room, locked the door. "Now, then," he said, turning to the footman, "sit down and let us hear what you have to say."

Service took the chair indicated and looked first at Goulburn and then at Christopher, who remained standing.

"I dare say you think this a strange intrusion, gentlemen," he began. "I hope I shall justify myself to you."

"We should certainly like to know why you come in this mysterious fashion," said Goulburn, "and why you have written me equally mysterious notes. You have warned me twice against the next-door house—your employer's. Now I want to know why."

Service looked round about him. In spite of his knowledge that door and window alike were secured, there was something of anxiety, if not of suspicion, in his manner, and his voice so far had never risen above a whisper.

"You're quite safe, Service," said Christopher, interpreting his meaning.

Service wiped his forehead.

"I live in such an atmosphere of mystery, gentlemen," he said, raising his voice to a more confident note, "that I'm afraid of anything. I never turn my head without expecting a face at my shoulder. It's getting on my nerves."

"What is getting on your nerves?" asked Goulburn.

Service jerked his head backward, in the direction of the next house.

"That, sir!" he replied significantly. "Our place—the black house."

Goulburn regarded him steadily for a full moment. He came to the conclusion that the man was not only quite sober but in deadly earnest about whatever errand it was on which he had come, and he took a chair at the table by which Service was seated and motioned Christopher to do the same.

"Now, then, Service, speak straight out," he said. "What is it?"

The footman leaned across the table; his voice sank to a whisper again.

"Mr. Goulburn, sir," he said, "I take it I'm not wrong in saying—in the most respectful manner, sir—that I believe your affections are engaged by Miss Philimore?"

"Yes, you may understand that," answered Goulburn.

"Thank you, sir," continued Service. "Of course I shall say nothing until the right time, sir; but, Mr.

Goulburn, if I were you, sir, I would do my very best to get Miss Phillimore away from that house—away from the people in it. If not, sir—well, you'll have trouble."

There was something so full of conviction in the man's tones, so peculiarly earnest in his manner, that Goulburn and Christopher looked at each other involuntarily as if to find some solution of the problem thus put before them. They turned to Service with the same question on their lips—

"What do you mean?"

Service leant farther forward across the table, looking from one face to the other.

"I mean this, gentlemen," he said, in a lower whisper than before: "it's my impression that next door is just a hotbed of crime. I believe that three people in it are members of a gang, and that nobody that's got money—like Miss Phillimore, for instance—is really safe amongst them. And I'm not talking off the top, gentlemen. I'm telling you the result of two years' observation and reflection."

After a moment's silence Goulburn spoke.

"You say three people in that house, Service," he said. "Now, let's be plain—you can speak confidently. You mean——?"

"I mean the doctor himself, sir, and Miss Lamotte, and Pimperry. The three of them!" said Service, with conviction. "The three of them, Mr. Goulburn."

Goulburn and Christopher looked at each other with wondering faces. Could the man really be right, or

was he indulging in wild theories generated by an overheated imagination?

"That's a serious charge, you know, Service," said Christopher. "Do you think you can substantiate it?"

"Mr. Aspinall, sir," replied Service. "I'm very well aware that it is a serious charge. I'm just as well aware that I believe it to be a true one. Now, gentlemen, I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you more than anything I've said so far. You've heard about this big diamond robbery?"

"Well?" said Goulburn.

"You haven't suspected anybody?"

"No."

Service bent still farther forward.

"Well, I have, gentlemen," he whispered. "I haven't a doubt that Lady Maxton's diamonds are in the possession of my employer—the doctor."

If Goulburn had been surprised by Service's previous conduct and statements, he was now more than surprised. He turned an amazed countenance on Christopher, and was astonished to find Christopher was betraying no emotion of any kind: there were certainly no signs of surprise on his face.

"That's a still more serious charge, Service," remarked Christopher. "How are you going to make that good?"

"Well, sir, I'll explain to you and Mr. Goulburn," replied Service. "First of all, let me tell you that I became suspicious of certain things very soon after I came next door, and I began to keep my eyes open,

and to make notes,—I can write a little shorthand, gentlemen, having at one time intended to embrace a commercial career,—and of course I've seen a good deal and overheard a good deal. But to come to this Maxton case first—did you gentlemen read the account of the robbery in the newspapers this morning? Yes, of course. Well, now, did you notice a description of a certain leather case in which the Countess of Maxton's diamonds were kept?"

"Yes," replied Christopher. "I read two or three accounts of it, in various newspapers. It appears to have been a stout leather box—box-like in shape, at any rate—with brass clampings at the corners and an ordinary lock."

"Yes, sir; and did you notice that it was pig-skin leather, and that it was ornamented or marked with a plain M in black, under the handle by which it was carried?" asked Service.

"Yes, I noticed that, now you mention it," replied Christopher.

"Very good, sir. Now when I read that in the newspapers I was instantly reminded of something," continued Service. "It's about a fortnight or three weeks ago, as near as I can recollect, that Pimperry did one day what I've scarcely ever known him to do before—gave me the keys of the strong-room in which he keeps the plate and so on, and told me to take a basketful of silver down there. I think it must have been just after the doctor had that big reception, when there was a lot of silver got out—he's got piles of it down there, and

gold plate too, for that matter. Well, while I was in that strong-room I thought I'd just have a look round, and I gratified my curiosity, gentlemen. Now, what happened just shows that even men like Pimpery may nod sometimes. In that strong-room there are two safes—one of these was open. I peeped into it without moving the door, which was perhaps four inches ajar. There were some bundles of papers in it, all tied up, but nothing else except a square leather box exactly like the description of that in which Lady Maxton kept her diamonds, even to the M under the handle. Well, of course I didn't think anything of that—I thought it might be a new dispatch-box for the master, and that the initial stood for Mildart, and I left the strong-room without any further thought of it. But I remembered it when I read the description of Lady Maxton's leather box in the newspaper," concluded Service, with a knowing look.

"And you think the boxes to be one and the same!" exclaimed Goulburn.

Service coughed deprecatingly.

"Pardon me, sir, I don't," he said. "No—not the same by any means."

"Then what do you think?"

Service glanced at Christopher and smiled.

"I think, gentlemen," he said, "that the box I saw in the safe was an exact copy, purposely made, of that belonging to Lady Maxton."

"Which really means," remarked Goulburn, "that you believe that in some way or other the copy was substituted for the original?"

Service smiled again. His smile was neither sly nor furtive, but it had a quality of self-confidence about it which made it somewhat elusive. It was difficult—so far, at any rate—for Goulburn to understand the man's evident confidence in his own surmises.

"Yes, sir," he said. "You're quite right. I do believe that the copy, stuffed with lead, cotton-wool, and paper, was substituted for the real thing."

"That's a big order, you know, Service," remarked Christopher. "You've evidently formed a strong theory of your own—according to it, when do you say the copy was substituted for the original?"

"Several nights ago, sir—in the Earl's dressing-room," replied Service, with evident confidence in his assertion.

"Oh! And by whom was the exchange effected, do you suggest?" asked Christopher.

Service's voice once again sank to a whisper; once again he glanced about him as if he were afraid of being heard or seen.

"By Lady Maxton herself, sir!" he said.

Christopher made his surprise at this communication felt in a sharp whistle; Goulburn, digging his hands in his pockets, began to work himself on the edge of his chair. He stared hard at Service, as if he were trying to make out what the man really meant.

"Ah!" said Christopher, after a slight pause. "That's what you think, is it? And do you suggest that Lady Maxton is aware of this?"

Service shook his head.

"No, sir!" he said emphatically. "I do not suggest that. I don't think her ladyship has the slightest idea of what she did."

"Then how is it possible she could do it?" asked Goulburn.

Once more Service lowered his voice to that significant whisper which seemed to hint at even more than he told; once more his eyes looked right and left before turning to the two friends.

"Because she was made to do it!" he whispered.

"Made to do it!"

"Yes, gentlemen, made to do it," repeated Service. "Look here, gentlemen, has it ever struck you what——"

He hesitated for a moment, as he always did when he came to mentioning van Mildart, and again he dropped his voice as he proceeded.

" . . . Has it ever struck you, I say, what sort of practice it is that's carried on there next door?" he asked. "I ought to know something, because I'd been with Sir Benjamin Hinstock before I came here—he's farther up the street, gentlemen. Next door's practice is—hypnotism. Who goes to him? Again I say I ought to know something, because I admit most of the patients—it's rarely that Pimperry does. Well, who are the patients? They're almost without exception society ladies whose nerves are ruined by their lives, gentlemen. A lot of them are old; some of them are young; they're all what I call faddy and silly, like Lady Max-

ton. It's very rarely that any men come—those who do are either old men or what my late master used to call hypochondriacs, which I believe means men who are always fancying that something's wrong with them. But there's twenty women to one man—I know, because I enter their names in a book. And what's the treatment? Does he ever give them any medicine? Why, there isn't a surgery in the house, and there aren't any drugs either! It's all done by mental treatment, suggestion, and such-like fine names—hypnotism I call it. And what I say, gentlemen, is this—if he can hypnotise a woman into believing that she's quite well, and that she won't have any more attacks of nerves, and that she'll sleep that night, and so on,—as he can, gentlemen, without doubt,—why, then, I say, he can hypnotise them into——”

“Handing over their jewels to him, eh, Service?” said Christopher.

“You apprehend me exactly, sir,” replied Service.

While Goulburn, who was much more surprised by the events of the evening than Christopher appeared to be, was still silently regarding Service with wondering eyes, Christopher began to walk up and down the room, apparently in deep thought. He came back to the table at last and sat down again.

“Look here, Service,” he said. “You spoke of the three people next door being a gang—to use your own words. Now, what do you mean?”

“Mr. Aspinall,” replied Service, “this affair of Lady

Maxton's isn't the first time; similar losses have befallen the people who come next door. It's the biggest, so far, but it's not the first, nor the second, nor the third. Do you remember the case last year of old Lady Beechingway's famous tiara? She was on her way to her jewellers, to have it repaired or something of the sort, and she made two calls—one at next door, and one at her bank. The tiara wasn't there when she got to Bond Street, and it's never been found. Then there were Miss Pelham's, the actress's, pearls—she was at one time coming every day to see either—him, you know, or Miss Lamotte."

"How long has Miss Lamotte been there?" asked Goulburn.

"She was there, sir, when I went there. So was Pimpery. And if you should ask me, sir, the—the doctor has some hold on Pimpery. Pimpery's frightened to death of him."

"How do you know that, Service?" asked Christopher.

"Well, sir, from things I've seen. I've seen him—when they didn't know I was looking—snap at Pimpery as if he were a dog, and Pimpery shrink away from him as if he expected to be struck," replied Service. "And once, sir, I saw Pimpery, after the doctor's back was turned, grind his teeth and shake his fist at him as if he'd have killed him. And the doctor turned sharply, and Pimpery was as meek as a child, gentlemen."

"Queer," said Christopher.

"Yes, sir, but I can tell you something queerer than that. Do you know that Pimperry has never been outside that house ever since I went into it, two years ago?"

"Never been out of the house? Do you mean literally never?"

"Yes, sir—never. He's never crossed the threshold for one moment," replied Service. "Never has a holiday, nor a day off, nor even goes to take the air of an evening, as other people do. He just stops in. When he isn't at work he sits in the butler's pantry, reading. He never talks to cook, nor to me, nor to anybody but the doctor and Miss Lamotte. I've caught him and her in close confabs many a time."

"It seems a queer business," said Christopher. "What do you think, Dick?"

Goulburn, who had been in close meditation for some minutes, looked at Service, and drew his chair nearer to the table.

"I want to know, Service," he said, "what it was that made you mention Miss Phillimore's name at the beginning of this conversation. What did you mean, for instance, when you advised me to get her away from the house next door as soon as possible—or words to that effect—unless I would have trouble?"

"Well, sir," replied Service, "although mine is only a domestic's place, I have eyes in my head, and I have observed, sir, that Miss Phillimore is neither well in health nor happy in mind."

"What has made you think that?"

"When Miss Phillimore first came, sir, she was

a young lady of very bright and lively manner, if I may say so," answered Service. "She used to go about the house laughing and singing; she played the piano a good deal, and had always a pleasant word for anybody she met—I mean the servants, sir. Lately, she's changed a good deal—she sits a lot by herself, sir, and I can see that she's thinking about something. She never plays the piano now, and she's very quiet to what she was. I've also observed, sir, that Miss Phillimore has of late looked very tired and pale."

"Weather," commented Christopher laconically. "We're all suffering from the weather."

But Service shook his head. He was evidently the sort of person who, having formed an opinion, stands by it.

"I have my own conclusions, sir," he said respectfully.

"I wish I could draw some!" exclaimed Goulburn, rising and beginning to pace the room with impatient strides. "I confess I never suspected such things as you have revealed to me to-night, Service. After all, they may be purely mistaken notions on your part."

Service shook his head again.

"Well, what do you propose to do?" asked Goulburn. "You must have some notion in your mind. Are you going to inform the police of your suspicions?"

"I, sir? No, sir! At least, not yet. It would require more evidence than I possess, sir, to warrant me in approaching the authorities," replied Service, in his most precise tones.

"Then why tell us all this to-night?"

"Because, sir, I think you ought to be warned—especially as regards the young ladies. I have sisters of my own, gentlemen, and also a fiancée. And"—here Service coughed significantly—"I understood that both Miss Phillimore and Miss Goulburn are possessed of considerable means."

Goulburn and Christopher exchanged significant glances. Each was thinking of the same thing—the mystery of Maisie's cheque.

"Well," said Goulburn presently, "I'm very much obliged to you, Service, for your warning, and you may be sure that we shall respect your confidence. I can't understand certain things. We shall see how matters develop. Now, this is a question I want to put to you—do you think you are quite safe in coming here to-night? I mean—are you safe if your suspicions are correct?"

"What Mr. Goulburn means," added Christopher, "is—don't you think that you may have been watched—shadowed?"

"No, sir," replied Service. "I adopted certain precautions. I am not afraid, gentlemen."

"I shouldn't like Dr. van Mildart to know that you have been here at this hour," said Goulburn. "It might arouse suspicions. And if your surmises are correct, that's the last thing one could wish to arouse."

"Precisely, sir," agreed Service. "But I shall regain next door without exciting attention. Indeed, I am believed to be at the bedside of a sick friend, and if you

will be kind enough to turn out your lights again, I will get away as unobtrusively as I came."

With that Service rose to go, and presently slipped out of the room and into the darkness. Goulburn turned up the lights again.

"I suppose he'll climb the wall?" he said, looking at Christopher.

"Trust him to escape observation," answered Christopher. "I think Mr. Service can take care of himself. What do you think of his notions, Dick?"

Goulburn made a gesture expressive of bewilderment.

"I don't know what to think," he said. "I must confess that I have thought Dr. van Mildart, and Miss Lamotte, and Pimperry all rather queer creatures, but it would never have struck me that they were in league as criminals. And yet——"

"Well?" said Christopher, as Goulburn paused abruptly. "What?"

"Why, I wish we knew the real truth about Maisie's affair," continued Goulburn. "How much do you know about hypnotism, Chris? Do you know enough to say whether it's possible for a man of van Mildart's power to so hypnotise a girl like Maisie that she would do quite unknowingly anything that he told her to do, and would have no recollection of it afterwards?"

"I don't know," said Christopher, with something like a groan. "But I'll find out to-morrow. If it is so—well, then, of course——"

"Yes, then, of course," interrupted Goulburn, "Serv-

ice's theory would be quite right. But what a power!"

"I'll take jolly good care he never exercises it on Maisie again!" exclaimed Christopher. "Indeed, I've made her promise that she never gives him the chance—neuralgia or no neuralgia. I'm not going to have that sort of thing. And I'm going to keep my eye on Dr. van Mildart."

"If he's as clever as all that, Chris," said Goulburn, with a sigh, "he'll not give you the chance—he'll keep an eye on you."

"We shall see," said Christopher, thumping his chest. "I won't be beaten easily—especially if there's any danger to Maisie."

"I wish I'd got Moira safely out of that house," said Goulburn, with yet another and a deeper sigh. "Service was quite right—she isn't looking well, and she is troubled about something. She's changed since she got there. However, I shall see her to-morrow."

"I know what I should do if I were in your case, old chap," said Christopher. "I should persuade her to marry you—at once. Then you'd have the right to protect her."

Goulburn stared at Christopher in amazement.

"Why, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, "we're only just engaged! I couldn't ask her to marry me so soon, you know."

"Couldn't you? I could," answered Christopher. "That is, I mean, I could—yes, and I would—if the cases were alike. It doesn't take long to get a special licence."

Goulburn considered the remarkable suggestion in silence.

"Well," he said at last, "I shall find out for myself to-morrow if anything really is the matter. And if it is——"

"Act promptly," said Christopher.

It was ten o'clock next morning when Goulburn went round to Dr. van Mildart's intending to take Moira into the Park, so that they could converse in privacy. As he went up the steps she opened the door and came out, dressed for walking. He saw at once that something had happened—she was very pale, and there was a look of fear in her eyes.

"I have been waiting for you," she said hurriedly. "Take me away somewhere at once. I—I can't breathe in that house!"

"What is it, Moira?" he asked anxiously. "What is it? You look frightened."

She cast a glance at the black house over her shoulder and shuddered.

"Haven't you heard?" she said. "Service, the footman, is dead. They found him dead in his bed early this morning!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE VAN MILDART WAY

IT WAS so plainly to be seen that Moira was in a state of considerable agitation that Goulburn took her by the arm and led her up the steps of his own house. She made some show of resistance.

"I'd rather not," she said. "I feel as if I couldn't get my breath within four walls. I'd rather keep out in the open air."

"No!" said Goulburn firmly. "You must come in and sit down for a while, or you'll be fainting."

"It would be for the first time, then!" she said, with a flash of her real spirit. "No—I won't faint."

"Come in, at any rate, for a while, then, and tell me all about it," said Goulburn. "You're very much upset, Moira."

"Yes," she replied, as she followed him across the hall and into the library, "I'll confess that I am. Somehow, I don't seem to have the nerve that I had, and I can't understand it."

"Take this chair," said Goulburn, drawing an easy-chair towards her. "I am going to get you some wine."

"No," she said. "I shouldn't drink it if you did. I'm better now. It was the sudden shock. You see, the poor

man was alive and in his usual health last night. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember," replied Goulburn, who had already made up his mind not to tell her anything of Service's midnight visit—at any rate until he knew more of the circumstances. "I was astonished to hear you say that he was dead. What was it?"

"My—uncle," she answered, using the term of relationship with an obvious effort, and as if there were something repugnant to her in it, "says that it is a very plain case of heart failure, and two other doctors who were fetched in from close by agree with him. But that didn't make the shock any the less sudden, did it? I'm not afraid of death, and I'm certainly not squeamish, but I was terribly upset. I think it was the thought of seeing the poor man moving about amongst us last night, quite in his usual health to all appearances, and then—— Yes, it did disturb me. And, Richard,"—she used his name for the first time, and unconsciously laid her hand on his arm as if appealing for protection,—“I felt somehow as if I couldn't breathe in that house, and I got on my hat and watched at the window for your coming—I wanted to get out. And, to tell you the truth, I've been feeling queer about living there for the last month—there's something uncanny about the place. At first I thought it might be with seeing all the sick people who came there; but I don't think it's that. I don't know what it is. It makes me feel as if I were somewhere where there's something—evil.”

Goulburn knelt down at her side, and putting his arm round her, drew her head on to his shoulder.

"You're overwrought, darling," he said. "But you're safe with me."

She turned her head a little and looked at him steadily, and her lips parted in a little sigh of content. And for the first time he bent and kissed her.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I can trust you, Richard."

Then, after a pause, she suddenly exclaimed—

"But oh, I want to get out of that house! I daren't sleep there to-night—I daren't even go back to lunch. I'm afraid."

"You shall neither go back to lunch nor sleep there," said Goulburn, striving to reassure her. "You are your own mistress."

"Yes," she said, "but Dr. van Mildart will think——"

"What does it matter what he thinks?" said Goulburn. "He has no control over you, has he? You see, dear, I know nothing of the facts—I don't even know," he continued, with a shy, half-boyish laugh, "I don't even know if you are twenty-one yet."

"Oh, but I am!" she said. "I was twenty-one just before I came back to London. Oh no, he has no control over me; but——"

"Well, what does that 'but' mean?"

"It means that he is one of those men who are accustomed to having their own way," she replied, "and he will be angry if I do not return."

"Let him be angry, then," said Goulburn. "Look

here, Moira. I'm going to send Maisie to you while I speak to Chris Aspinall—they're in the billiard-room. Promise me to remain here with Maisie, because when I've talked to Chris I shall have something to say to you."

"Oh, yes, I will stay here," she said. "And really I'm feeling better now—only awfully sorry for that poor man."

Goulburn kissed her fondly, and then ran upstairs to the billiard-room, where Christopher, in his shirt-sleeves and with a large pipe in his mouth, was giving lessons in the art of holding a cue to his sweetheart, who usually rewarded him by telling him that he was much too proficient at the game, and must have spent far more time and money in learning it than was good for him. They looked round in surprise at Goulburn's abrupt entrance.

"Maisie," said Goulburn, "there's Moira downstairs in the library. Go to her, will you, please? I want to talk to Chris for a minute."

Maisie laid down her cue and hurried away. Christopher brought off a beautiful red winner, and was lost in admiration of his own skill. He glanced round at Goulburn and saw him closing the door behind his sister, and that his face was very grave.

"Anything the matter, old chap?" he asked.

Goulburn came up to him and rested a hand on the billiard-table.

"I say, Chris," he said, "what do you think has happened?"

"I don't know," answered Chris. "Something serious?"

"Service is dead!"

Christopher's pipe fell with a crash on the table; its ashes flew all over the green cloth.

"Service dead!" he exclaimed. "Dead? Nonsense, Dick!"

"He is!" said Goulburn. "They found him dead in bed this morning. Moira has just told me of it. Heart failure."

"Heart failure? Who says so? Van Mildart, I suppose?"

"Yes, and two other doctors, whom they fetched from close by," replied Goulburn. "But it's queer, isn't it, Chris?"

Christopher carefully dusted the ashes off the table and relighted the tobacco in his pipe.

"Queer?" he said. "Yes—I should think it is queer. Of course there'll be an inquest?"

"Oh, sure to be, I suppose," said Goulburn. "I believe that's the rule in these cases."

Then there was a silence, and both young men seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Look here, Dick," said Christopher at last, "are we going to hold our tongues about last night, or are we going to speak? How do we know there hasn't been foul play?"

"The inquest will prove that," said Goulburn. "They're sure to have a post-mortem examination. Let's wait and see what is said then. If anything turns up

that seems to indicate foul play, we can speak. It is certainly a strang thing that the poor fellow should die so suddenly just after warning us of possible danger, though, of course, not of that sort. It's frightened Moira dreadfully, Chris. And she doesn't want to go back to the house."

"If she were my future wife," said Christopher, with great emphasis and decision, "she would not go back to the house!"

Goulburn paced the room for a few moments.

"Look here, Chris," he said at last, coming back to where Christopher was once more practising fancy shots, "you remember what we were talking about last night after Service left us?"

"Not particularly," answered Christopher. "What was it?"

"About Moira's safety," said Goulburn, wondering that Christopher could have forgotten such an important matter. "And you suggested, you know, that she and I should be married at once. Have you forgotten?"

"Oh, yes, I remember now. And the best and wisest thing, too, old chap," said Christopher, "especially seeing that she isn't happy next door. Of course, everybody knows that you're awfully gone on each other—that was patent to any observant eye from the very first."

"Well, you said something about getting a special licence," said Goulburn. "How is it done? Can it be done quickly?"

"So far as I know, from mere hearsay," replied Christopher, "it is quite a quick-shave business. I must admit, however, that my knowledge of the matter has not been derived from the most unimpeachable sources, but chiefly from bad novels, in which it has been necessary for such unions to take place at, metaphorically speaking, a moment's notice, because the heroine was about to be carried off by the villain, or the good young hero was about to expire and wished to know her his for but ten sweet seconds. Seriously, ask Conybeare. Or you might find something about it in Whitaker—you've one on your desk. Here, I'll fetch it."

And Christopher darted out of the billiard-room in his usual agile fashion, and within two minutes was back, with the Whitaker open and his finger pointing to a certain passage.

"Here you are, old chap," he said. "That's how and where you get them, and the cost's about thirty pounds, as you see. But if I were you I should see Conybeare—if he goes with you, you'll get it all the quicker. He'll know more about it than we can learn from that."

"Yes," answered Goulburn, running over the passage which Christopher had pointed out, "of course I shall consult Conybeare. Well, Chris, if I can persuade Moira to it, we'll be married at once. But——"

"Well?" said Christopher, as Goulburn paused.

"I'd always hoped that the four of us would be married at the same time," said Goulburn. "Look here,

Chris, why not? It's only a question of getting two licences instead of one, and—— Why do you look so very sternly at me?"

"Because I am of stern stuff, my boy!" replied Christopher, shouldering his cue. "Now look here, Dick, don't begin tempting me. There's not the same reason why Maisie and I should marry in such haste that there is in your case. Moira seems to have nobody but you, whereas Maisie has got you and she's got more than you—she's got me! And again, I swore a solemn oath that I wouldn't marry Maisie until Christmas, when I shall have a junior partnership, and my name up,—Pepperall, Tardrew, & Aspinall, my boy,—and be a full-fledged City merchant, in tea; and I'm not going to break it. Maisie and I understand each other very well, Dick—we've got our own ideas and plans. You get married—and be happy."

So Goulburn left Christopher to his fancy strokes, and went down to the library, where Moira and Maisie were still in conversation on the subject of Service's sudden death. Maisie was shocked at the news, but not unduly so, and she scarcely understood Moira's evident horror of returning to the house next door. She was pressing her to remain with them when Goulburn came back.

"Leave that to Moira and me, Maisie," he said. "Run off to Chris—I'm going to arrange things with Moira."

When they were alone he plunged straight into the subject.

"Moira, you have promised to marry me," he said. She bowed her head without making any audible reply.

"Will you marry me at once?" he asked, watching her closely.

She looked at him attentively with candid eyes—the colour welled up in her cheeks.

"At once!" she repeated. "How could we? And why?"

"Because," he said, taking her hands and drawing her to him, "you are feeling very much in need of some one to protect you, and once I am your husband I shall have the right, which I haven't now. And as to how we could—well, all there is to do is to get a special licence. Conybeare will help me in that. If you agree, we can be married to-morrow, or, at any rate, the day after."

"To-morrow! The day after!" she exclaimed. "Oh, but——"

"You don't want to go back next door, Moira!" he said.

Her face lost its mounting colour and grew pale.

"No!" she answered. "No, I don't—and won't. I've decided while I was talking to Maisie that I shall send in a note next door telling my maid to pack my things and to meet me at Claridge's this afternoon. I'll go there for a while."

"Go there for to-night, and marry me to-morrow morning," he urged, with a determination which sur-

prised himself. "As soon as we're married I'll take you away. We'll go to Norway."

She hesitated, keeping her face averted from him.

"Come, say you will, Moira," he said. "I want to feel that I've the right to protect you. And why should we wait? We've no doubt about our love for each other."

She suddenly turned and threw her arms round his neck.

"Very well," she said. Then after a moment's silence, she exclaimed, half-starting from his arms, "But oh! my uncle. What will he say?"

"What can he say?" said Goulburn. "After all, he has no hold upon you—you are of age and your own mistress. You're not frightened of him, are you, Moira?"

"No-o," she answered half-doubtfully—"at least, I don't know. You see, I know him so very little, and he is not the sort of man I had fancied he would be."

"How do you mean? Surely you had known him before you returned to London?" said Goulburn.

"No, I never had," she replied. "I had never seen him in my life. When we lived in England he was in America—South America, not the States—and when we went to the States he came over here. No, I had never seen him at all until two months ago."

"What is it in him that frightens you?" asked Goulburn. "He is a man of very pleasant and hospitable manners, and very good company."

Moira shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know what it is. I've always felt crushed, repressed, stifled in that house."

Goulburn kissed her reassuringly.

"Never mind, dearest," he said. "That's all over. But, listen—now that we've decided exactly as to our plans, I want us to be perfectly straightforward about them. Come with me next door—don't be afraid—and I'll tell Dr. van Mildart everything, and explain that you have been so much upset by Service's sudden death that you feel you would rather go to Claridge's until to-morrow. Then you can give your maid instructions about meeting you at Claridge's, and I will take you to lunch somewhere before going to see about the special licence."

Moira showed no particular desire to see Dr. van Mildart, but she made no opposition to Goulburn's proposal, and together they went next door, to be admitted by Pimpery, whose countenance was as inscrutable and eyes as far off and dead as ever. The doctor was just then engaged, but he soon came to them in the library, active and bustling as ever.

"Ah, good morning, Goulburn," he said. "I suppose my niece has told you of poor Service's sudden death?—it has quite upset all of us this morning. Personally, I am not surprised—he had suffered from heart disease for some time. You do not look well, Moira," he continued, turning to his niece, who, now that he was within the house again, began to feel all her previous horror of it.

"No," she answered, "I am not well."

"There is no doubt that you need a change of air," said Dr. van Mildart. "So do I, but I cannot get away just yet. I have been thinking of hiring a yacht and going for a good cruise in northern latitudes. What do you say, Goulburn? Shall we make a party?"

"To tell you the truth, sir," he said, half-turning to Moira and smiling at her, "your niece and I have made an arrangement which will rather prevent that. She has promised to marry me."

Dr. van Mildart nodded, and presumably looked at both of them through his impenetrable glasses.

"I am not at all surprised to hear it," he said. "In fact, I have been expecting such an announcement for the last two or three weeks. Well—I think you are admirably fitted for each other, and I wish you every happiness. But I don't see how the mere fact of your engagement should prevent us from forming a yachting party. You're not going to be married just yet, I suppose."

"The fact is, sir," replied Goulburn, "that we intend to be married at once, and to leave for some part of Northern Europe immediately. We are sure of each other—there is no reason why we should wait—and it is time, as you say, that Moira left town."

Dr. van Mildart stroked his beard.

"What do you mean by at once?" he asked.

"As soon as possible," replied Goulburn boldly. "As soon as I can procure a special licence: to-morrow, or next day, or the day after that."

"Special licences," said the doctor, "are only granted where good reason is shown."

"I shall plead Moira's health," said Goulburn.

"Oh, I've no doubt you'll have no difficulty," said the doctor, in his airiest manner, "not the slightest. Well, I have nothing to say against it, though you both seem to be in a hurry. However, if you're sure of yourselves, nobody else has anything to do with it—you're free agents in a free country. You'll let me know when and where you're to be married, because I should naturally like to be present at the ceremony."

"Oh, of course!" answered Goulburn, who was much relieved at finding Dr. van Mildart so acquiescent. "You shall be fully informed."

The doctor pulled out his watch.

"I must go," he said. "I've another appointment at once. Well, I shall see you later in the day, Moira."

Moira summoned up all her courage.

"I—I don't think so," she said. "Please don't think me rude, but I have been so much upset by what occurred this morning that I don't think I could sleep in the house to-night. It was so—so sudden, you know, and I got frightened. If you don't mind, and won't think me ungrateful, I'll tell Cecile to pack my things and to meet me at Claridge's this afternoon. Just now, I'm going to lunch with Mr. Goulburn."

The doctor had been stroking his Vandyke beard during this speech, and his dark spectacles were fixed on his niece's face. He nodded his head once or twice as she spoke.

"Oh, certainly, certainly, my dear, if you wish it!" he said. "I quite understand that Service's sudden death has upset you, and that it isn't very cheerful to be in the house just now, though really, as a matter of fact, the poor fellow's body was removed an hour ago. But do just what you please—make your own arrangements. Only let me be informed as to when and where the wedding will be."

Then he said good morning to them and hurried away to keep his appointment, and Moira went to find her maid and give her the necessary instructions.

"I'm glad that's over," she said, as she and Goulburn left the house. "Somehow, I didn't expect that he would be so amenable. And yet I am, after all, my own mistress."

"Of course," said Goulburn. "What could he do, however much he objected?"

After they had lunched together at the Berkeley, they went on to see Mr. Conybeare, who received the news of their engagement with a cordiality bordering upon enthusiasm, but became somewhat grave when he heard of the proposed hasty marriage.

"Of course it can be managed," he said. "I will go with you to Doctor's Commons, and get the matter through for you. But you are very foolish young people, you know. I am bound to tell you that."

"I am afraid we don't quite see that we are," said Goulburn, smiling. "We believe we are doing the wisest thing possible to us."

"No doubt, no doubt!" replied the solicitor. "But you

seem to forget that when two very rich young people like you marry there should be all sorts of things done—settlements, and so on. Just look what wealth is locked up in the two of you!”

“But does that matter?” asked Moira. “It is ours.”

“My dear young lady, it is yours, certainly, but you must be business-like in your dealings with it,” said Mr. Conybeare. “I have been wanting to see both of you lately with respect to business matters, but I suppose you were so occupied with each other that you had no time for me. Now, do you know that between you you have nearly a million of money lying at call at the Bank of England? There is half a million of yours, Miss Phillimore, and just over four hundred thousand of yours, Mr. Goulburn. Now, you know, all that money ought to be invested.”

“But it’s all right where it is, isn’t it?” said Moira.

“My dear lady, it’s as right—as right as the Bank itself,” laughed Mr. Conybeare. “But it was not meant to lie there at bank rates—it should be invested in the very best securities obtainable.”

“Mr. Conybeare is quite right, Moira,” said Goulburn. “We’ll go into all that, Mr. Conybeare, when we return from our wedding-trip.”

“Ah, to be sure!” said the solicitor. “Pleasure before business with all you young people. Now, you’d much better have put off your marriage until next spring, and given us poor lawyers the intervening months in which to put everything straight for you. Well!—now for this special licence. I’m sure you’ll

make a very good-looking couple, and I should like to see you married."

That night Goulburn called on Dr. van Mildart, and told him that all the necessary formalities would be complied with early next day, and that the marriage was to be solemnised at a certain church in Mayfair at noon. The doctor promised to be there; he had to attend the inquest on Service at one o'clock, he said, and should therefore have to hurry away, but he would be certain to be present.

"They held the post-mortem on Service this afternoon," he said. "Of course, it was just heart failure. I knew that he had suffered from heart disease for some time. Not an uncommon case?—oh, dear me, no!—much more common than is generally supposed. Yet he seemed to be quite well on the previous evening. But a little over-exertion—more than anything, a little unusual excitement—and the machine stops running."

When Goulburn had left the house, Dr. van Mildart went to his private telephone and rang up a West End club. It was some minutes before he got into communication with the man he wanted. When he did, the message which he sent over the wire to him was short and sharp—

"All right—have everything in readiness at seven o'clock to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER IX

KIDNAPPED

G OULBURN woke at an unusually early hour next morning, and, suddenly remembering that that was his wedding-day, became instantly assured that he would certainly not go to sleep again. Glancing at the clock on his mantelpiece, he saw that it was just half-past six, and as he had several small matters to attend to before setting out for Mr. Conybeare's office soon after breakfast, he decided to rise. Had Christopher Aspinall still been in the house he would have routed him out of bed too, just for the sake of having somebody to talk to; but Christopher had gone a little way out of town on the previous evening in order to see a sick relative, and would not return until just before the ceremony—at which no one but himself, Maisie, Dr. van Mildart, and Miss Lamotte were to be present.

It was half-past seven when Goulburn made an end of his toilet, and within the succeeding three-quarters of an hour he had done all the things that he wanted to do, and there was yet a similar stretch of time to get through before breakfast. But at half-past eight Maisie appeared and made some company for him. She

had not yet got over her surprise and astonishment at hearing of what was to take place that day, and she was almost wistful, and more than usually affectionate in her attitude towards him as they sat awaiting breakfast.

"I'm sure you're really much too young to be married, Dick dear," she said, stroking his cheek. "I've always felt such a little mother to you that you seem quite a small boy yet."

"What about Chris, then?" asked Goulburn, laughing at her.

"Oh, but Chris is quite three years older than you, Dick, and he's so much more experienced and old-fashioned," she said. "Why, it seems to me as if you and Moira were nothing but children—you really are only a boy."

"Well, we'll get on somehow, Maisie," he said confidently. "We haven't much doubt about things, Moira and I. You'll find us a quite old-fashioned and well-accustomed couple when you join us," he continued, referring to the fact that Maisie, who was that day expecting a long-promised visit from an old school friend, was on its expiration to meet him and Moira at Christiana preparatory to a long trip amongst the Norwegian fjords, "and you'll see what a model husband I shall make. It's a pity Chris can't go with us for a few weeks—I might teach him some lessons."

"I shall make Chris go for his holiday this very afternoon," said Maisie. "He's been dangling about town too long—he wants some country air. Then Violet

and I will have the house all to ourselves. She'll be disappointed in not seeing you, Dick—I'd told her so much about you. Now, if she'd only arrived this morning, she might have gone with me to see you married."

Goulburn was about to reply that he was sorry his sister's friend would miss such a grand occasion, when the parlour-maid appeared at the door looking somewhat surprised.

"There is some one in the hall wishes to speak to you, sir," she said, glancing at Goulburn in a somewhat embarrassed manner.

"Some one in the hall? Wishes to speak to me? Who is it, Mary?"

"I don't know, sir—a young man, sir. He seems to be in a great hurry."

"What is he like? Didn't he tell you his business?" asked Goulburn.

"No, sir, except that he must see you at once. I—I think he's a footman, sir," answered the parlour-maid.

Goulburn, wondering what any one could want with him at that hour, left the library and walked across to the outer hall. There, outlined against the open door, he saw a young man whose appearance justified the description which the parlour-maid had given of him—a tall, well-built young fellow, dressed in sober black, who bowed politely as Goulburn advanced to meet him.

"Mr. Goulburn?" he said interrogatively.

"Yes," replied Goulburn.

"I am from Dr. Maddison, of Prince's Gate, sir.

This morning, about half-past seven, a lady was thrown from her horse close by our house, and was carried into the surgery. It is not a dangerous injury, sir," the man hastened to add, seeing that Goulburn was already manifesting signs of concern—"a broken arm, sir; but the lady will not be able to be moved just yet. She asked my master to send for you and your sister, sir, as she wished to see you both at once."

He put into Goulburn's hand two cards—one Dr. Maddison's, the other Moira's. Goulburn started at the latter as if he could scarcely credit his senses.

"You're sure it's nothing worse than that?" he said.

"That is all that I was told, sir," answered the man politely.

"We will go at once," said Goulburn. "Mary, ring up the stables, and tell Jarvis to bring round the brougham instantly."

"I have my master's brougham at the door, sir," said the man. "The horses are very fast."

Goulburn glanced through the open door, and saw a quiet-looking but perfectly appointed brougham standing outside. Its coachman was lazily flicking the flies off two fine bays, who seemed impatient to be in movement.

"That will be better," said Goulburn. "We shall save time. Never mind the stables, Mary. We will be ready at once," he continued, turning to the footman.

He ran back to the library, sick at heart and with something of a feeling of impending catastrophe heavy

upon him. As yet he could not realise that an accident, even of a trivial nature, could have happened to the girl to whom, if all had gone well, he would have been married in the course of a few hours. But, while incapable of this particular realisation, he was fully capable of realising that matters might be much worse than he knew of. It was the usual thing, as he knew, to minimise such affairs when breaking the news of them, and he had fancied that he observed an air of reticence about the messenger. For aught he knew, Moira might be very seriously injured, perhaps dead. Why had this thing come on what should have been their wedding-day?

Maisie saw the concern in his face as he entered the library, and ran to him.

"Something's the matter, Dick?" she said.

"Yes," he answered slowly, "something's the matter, Maisie. Moira's had an accident—a fall from her horse—and the man says her arm is broken. Perhaps that's a mere phrase—it may be worse."

"Oh no, no!" she said. "They'd have told you."

He shook his head miserably.

"Get ready, Maisie," he said. "She's at some doctor's house in Kensington. His brougham's waiting outside. She wants us to go to her."

Then, when Maisie had hurried away, it suddenly occurred to him that while she was getting ready for this unexpected visit, he might tell Dr. van Mildart of the news, and he left the house and went next door.

Pimpery, stolid and strange as ever, answered his summons.

"Is your master at home, Pimpery?" Goulburn inquired.

"No, sir," replied the butler. "My master went away before seven o'clock this morning. I believe he has gone into the country, sir—he was driven to King's Cross."

Goulburn hesitated for a moment, wondering whether he should ask for Miss Lamotte, but catching sight of Maisie, who was just coming down the steps from their own house, he made some remark about seeing Dr. van Mildart later on, and hurried to join his sister. Together they entered the carriage, and were rapidly driven away.

It was plain to Maisie that her brother was seriously troubled, and she made haste to reassure him.

"Don't look at the worst side of things straight off, Dick," she said. "You've no reason to think that the man has not told you the whole truth, for there's no reason why he should conceal it. I expect the fine morning tempted Moira out for a ride, and that her horse slipped, or something of that sort. You'll find it won't be a bit worse than the man says."

"I don't know," said Goulburn, with a gloomy shake of his head. "It's the usual thing to break all these things to you by degrees. The doctor evidently wanted us to be there as quickly as possible, or he wouldn't have sent his carriage for us—he could have telephoned for us."

"Perhaps he isn't on the telephone," she answered. "Anyway, we shall soon be there now, Dick."

Looking back upon it subsequently, Goulburn remembered every incident of that hurried drive across the West End. Things and incidents are invariably impressed upon the mind at such times, and he unconsciously noted matters which he would have disregarded or treated with indifference on any other occasion. Thus, he observed that the appointments of the brougham in which he and Maisie were riding were very elegant and luxurious, that the springs were perfect and the movement absolutely smooth, and that the horses kept up a smart trot all the way. He noticed the way in which London was waking to its daily tasks—in Oxford Street the usual stream of vehicles and pedestrians were pouring city-wards; the shops were just opening, and shirt-sleeved assistants were eagerly criticising the appearance of the windows they had just set out with goods. In the Park still lingered people who had either come out late for their ante-breakfast ride or had breakfasted at an early hour. The vanguard of the customary army of nurses and their charges was already debouching upon the usual parade ground; here and there on the grass, cast down like so many bundles of useless rags, lay the unkempt, unwashed derelicts of humanity, for whom the day could afford nothing better than the opportunity of lying idle in the sun. The first brilliancy of the green had gone from the trees, but there had been gentle showers earlier in the morning, and the flowers in their

beds amidst the patches of lawn looked gay and bright enough for the end of spring instead of being parched by the heat of declining summer.

Goulburn found himself watching the various places by which they passed as if he had never seen them before, though they were all as familiar to him as his own fingers. And he suddenly asked a question, half-impatiently, half-querulously—

“How far is it to Prince’s Gate, Maisie?”

Maisie looked at him, and recognised that his nerves were upset.

“We’re close by, dear,” she said. “Don’t you remember?—we used to know this part so well when you and Chris used to take me into Kensington Gardens.”

Goulburn looked about him, almost vacantly.

“Oh yes!” he said indifferently, “I remember now. I was only thinking that we seemed to be driving a long way.”

However, at that moment the brougham turned into Prince’s Gate, and in another moment had drawn up at the door of an imposing-looking house. The man who had brought the message to Goulburn sprang down from his seat beside the coachman, opened the door, and ushered them up the steps. As they left it, the brougham was rapidly driven away.

The man opened the door of the house with a latch-key, and ushered Goulburn and Maisie into a large entrance hall, which felt singularly cool after the July heat which filled the streets outside. It was somewhat curious in appearance, this hall; long and high, with

marble-faced walls, it showed little of decoration beyond a few massively framed oil-paintings and a miniature fountain in the middle of the black-and-grey pavement. No staircase went off from it, but on either side of it were three great doors, canopied over with elaborately carved woodwork; a similar door closed in the farther extremity.

Goulburn and his sister had scarcely time to notice the singular silence and gloom of this cloister-like place. Their conductor, opening the first door on the right-hand side of the hall, revealed what was evidently a waiting-room, and bowed them within.

"I will tell Dr. Maddison you are here, sir," he said, and went away and closed the door upon them.

Goulburn and Maisie looked round the room. There was nothing in it to distinguish it from any similar apartment; the objects seen in a fashionable physician's waiting-room were to be seen in this. In the centre was a long table, whereon were carefully arranged the newspapers, the reviews, and the magazines. Straight-backed chairs were set against the walls with proper regard to mathematical precision; easy-chairs appeared in close proximity to the fireplace and at intervals about the room. The windows were gay with flowering plants; between them a gaudily plumaged macaw hung in a gilded cage. On the soberly tinted walls, each hung with due regard to proper spacing, were twelve steel engravings of famous pictures. Goulburn, who was beginning to take a serious interest in art, observed that they were of excellent quality. And

there were two stands of books—one filled with volumes of the better-class magazines and reviews, the other with the latest novels. No one having occasion to wait some time in that room need lack the means whereby to spend it profitably.

Impatient for news of Moira, neither brother nor sister either sat down or took up newspaper or magazine. After glancing round the room and noting its contents and appearance, they began to fidget as people usually do who find themselves constrained to wait indefinitely in a strange place. The clock on the mantelpiece went on ticking—five minutes past, ten minutes past, and no one came to them. Goulburn grew restive.

"I wish some one would come," he said. "If no one appears within the next five minutes, I shall ring the bell."

However, he had scarcely spoken when the door opened, and a woman in the dress of a nurse entered. She was a tall, handsome woman of sturdy and vigorous frame, and her square jaw, steady eyes, and resolute expression conveyed an instant suggestion of great physical and mental strength. Her glance went directly to Maisie.

"Miss Goulburn?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes?" answered Maisie.

"Will you kindly come with me?" said the woman in the nurse's dress. Then, turning to Goulburn, she said, "If you will wait a few moments, sir, the doctor will come to you."

"Can you give me some news of Miss Phillimore?" asked Goulburn, as Maisie prepared to follow her guide from the room. "Is she very much hurt? Is it very serious?"

"Oh, I don't think so," replied the nurse. "But the doctor can tell you more than I can."

With that she ushered Maisie from the room and closed the door again upon Goulburn, who was left to fume and fret with impatience. He picked up an illustrated paper, and almost instantly threw it down again. He turned over the pages of a magazine, and saw nothing. A full quarter of an hour went by, and no one appeared. He opened the door and looked out into the hall; it was empty, and the whole house was as silent as the grave; the noise of the traffic from outside seemed scarcely to penetrate its walls. He shut the door again and waited; when at last it opened again, he turned eagerly to meet whoever might enter.

The man who entered was a tall, heavily built, clean-shaven individual, of apparently fifty or thereabouts, dressed scrupulously in black, perfectly groomed, gold-spectacled. He bowed slightly as he looked at Goulburn; the latter felt, more than recognised, a certain keen scrutiny in the inspection which the steady, penetrating eyes behind the spectacles gave him.

"Mr. Goulburn?" he said. And without waiting for an answer he continued, "I am sorry you have been kept so long. Will you kindly follow me?"

He turned as he spoke and marched with a strong,

heavy step out of the room, leaving Goulburn to follow at his heels. The latter, filled as he was with anxiety about Moira, found himself wondering at the evident strength of the man's hands, which he held, loosely grasped, behind his back as he walked along the hall. They were peculiarly sinewy and muscular, and looked powerful enough to knock down an ox.

"If I am addressing Dr. Maddison," said Goulburn, "I should like to know how Miss Phillimore really is, and if her injuries are serious?"

The big man spoke over his shoulder.

"I am Dr. Maddison's assistant," he said. "He will be able to tell you more than I can."

This answer, short and somewhat careless in tone, only made Goulburn's anxiety the greater. He wondered why his guide should be so curt in manner, and set him down as a churlish fellow by nature.

"This way, Mr. Goulburn," said the big man.

He opened the door at the end of the hall, and revealed a flight of stairs, richly carpeted. The corridor at the head of these was like the hall they had just left—cool, silent, and its walls faced with marble tiles and ornamented here and there with oil-paintings. Traversing it for some little distance, they turned aside into a narrow corridor, the carpeting of which was just as thick and soft to the touch. In this, as in the other, the silence was profound. Goulburn formed the impression that Dr. Maddison must take private patients, and that the house was a sort of hospital; but if so, where were nurses, and attendants, and servants? The corridor was

empty of life; there was no sound anywhere. And he was conscious of a strange sense of utter isolation in the house.

His guide presently stopped, opened a door, and with a sign beckoned Goulburn to follow him. They stepped into a small ante-chamber, some nine feet square, in the farther wall of which was a closed door. This the big man opened gently, revealing a large screen which hid all view of the room within. He motioned Goulburn to enter.

"Please to make no noise," he whispered with admonitory finger, as he stood aside.

Goulburn walked in on tiptoe and went round the screen. A sudden startled exclamation burst from his lips; he sprang back at a bound for the door. The door snapped in his face, and he heard the sharp click of a patent lock. Then all was silent.

Silent! Silent as the grave, or as one of those horrible oubliettes in which they used to immure their captives in the Bastille.

That he was trapped; that there was foul play; that he and Maisie, and in all probability Moira also, were victims of conspiracy and treachery; that they, judging from his situation, were most likely utterly helpless and in the hands of merciless enemies—he was now as certain as that he breathed. He was trapped—as securely trapped as a rat in a cage.

Though not by any means a coward, Goulburn felt his heart thumping against his ribs with such violence that he could scarcely draw breath. His tongue suddenly

became of a fiery dryness; his palate felt as if some fiendish hand had poured quicklime upon it; his lips opened and remained apart through the sheer thirst which only intense fear can arouse. It seemed to him that he had suddenly become enclosed in a living grave. He was at the mercy of whoever it was that had thus secured him; how long did they mean him to be thus imprisoned?

Then he groaned aloud, leaning against the door, because the thought of Moira and Maisie came to him. He pictured them caged, trapped, helpless—as he was. And women!

After the first sickening moment Goulburn made an effort to pull himself together, realising that he must keep his wits about him and not give way to panic. He tried the door, and at once perceived that it was as securely fastened and as impregnable as that of a vault in the cellars of the Bank of England. From examining its fit and tapping its panels he came to the conclusion that it was an iron door cased over with mahogany—one might as well have thought of lifting the Monument as of forcing it or cutting through it, he said to himself. And with that, he pushed aside the screen and made a careful inspection of what he now felt to be nothing less than a prison cell.

The room into which he had been so easily inveigled was about sixteen feet square, and was lighted by one window, which was securely fenced in by stout bars of iron. What might lie beyond the window it was impossible to tell, for the glass was a dull opaque. The

walls of the room, bare of any picture or ornament, were painted in a drab tint, which helped to communicate an air of melancholy to the place. The furniture was of the most meagre description. In one corner stood a narrow camp bedstead; beneath the window was a plain washstand; on another side was an equally plain toilet table. An easy-chair stood in the centre of the room, two bedroom chairs were ranged on either side of the toilet table. Nothing plainer or more cell-like could have been imagined. And the silence was profound. Yet, as Goulburn knew very well, the tide of London's busy life was flowing at the full only a few yards away from him.

"It's like being in a trap," he muttered to himself. "Just like being in a trap! And what am I here for? And where are Maisie and Moira?"

That van Mildart was at the bottom of this he now believed with an intense appreciation of the treachery played upon himself and his sister, and presumably upon Moira. But why—why? He flung himself down in the easy-chair and tried to arrive at some notion as to the reason of this outrage.

An hour went by—another hour—nothing occurred to break the monotony of his imprisonment. He felt sure that Maisie must have met the same treatment, and shuddered to think of her fear. Moira he had more confidence of—she had nerves and pluck. And yet she would be frightened, because she would wonder what had become of him.

At one o'clock a sudden clicking sound made him

start. Looking round, he saw that what he had taken to be the door of a small cupboard in the wall was slowly opening. Wide open, it revealed a cavity about eighteen inches square. On the bottom of this some unseen hand placed a small tray furnished with materials for lunch—half a cold chicken, salad, bread, a bottle of claret. The hand vanished.

Goulburn sprang to the unsuspected entrance to his prison and shouted into it—

“Here—you! Why am I locked in here? Why——?”

He heard the slamming of an iron door on the other side of the wall; then there was silence again. It was evident that no one was going to speak to him merely because he desired it.

He examined the opening through which his lunch had been thrust, and found that it was like the hatches which were fitted in the cells of the Carthusian monasteries—a double rectangular return in the thickness of the wall, which permitted any one outside to pass anything inside without being seen, thus:—



and he tried to pass his arm through the opening to feel for the iron door which had been slammed in response to his cry, but found it impossible to reach it. Then he gained some notion of the thickness of the wall, and realised that he was more securely entrapped than he had dreamed of.

Goulburn ate and drank—first, because it struck him as being a wise thing; secondly, because it would pass the time. When he had finished he put the tray back in the hatch—a moment later, without his hearing any audible sound, it was whisked away, and in its stead appeared a pile of books and newspapers and a box of cigarettes. Then the outer door closed again with a metallic crash. The afternoon went by in utter silence.

At half-past seven his unseen jailer served him with dinner. It was an excellent dinner, well cooked, and the wine was of the best vintages, and the coffee and liqueur which followed equally good. Then came silence again, and at last the twilight. With it his cell—for he now so regarded it—was flooded with electric light, which shone from a lamp in the ceiling too high for him to reach.

At eleven o'clock this light went out as suddenly as it had been turned on.

Goulburn threw himself on the bed in his trousers and shirt. And, strange as it appeared to him afterwards, he fell into a deep sleep—deep and dreamless.

He suddenly awoke with a start—to find his prison again brilliantly lighted, and two men standing at his bedside.

CHAPTER X

HELD FOR RANSOM

GOULBURN'S first instinct on awaking was to spring to his feet and confront the two men who had entered the room during his sleep. He had slept much more heavily than was usual with him, and he felt dazed and confused, but he quickly recognised in one of the men the individual who had led him into captivity. And it was with considerable indignation that he faced this person and put a direct question to him.

"Why have I been detained against my will in this room?"

The man addressed regarded Goulburn with a cold stare of absolute indifference. He might have been a prison warder to whom a convicted criminal was no more than a number. After staring at Goulburn for a few seconds he spoke, and his voice was as cold as his eyes.

"Put on your vest and coat and follow us," he said, in tones which implied the necessity of entire obedience.

"I should like to know by what right you order me to do anything!" exclaimed Goulburn angrily. "I demand my instant release from this place."

The man shrugged his shoulders and glanced significantly at his companion. Goulburn's eyes, following

that glance, rested upon another man of equal size and presumably of equal strength to the first. Certainly, if the object of whoever it was that was directing all these strange things was to awe him by a display of *force majeure*, these two were well chosen for the purpose. Each was over six feet in height and of strong muscular build; each had cruel, implacable eyes; each had the mouth and chin of the mere brute.

"Put on your vest and coat and follow us," commanded the first man again.

Goulburn realised that opposition to such superior forces was useless. He put on his clothes, fuming at the necessity.

"This is an outrage!" he said, "and you shall pay for it."

The second man smiled a little; the first man's grim countenance never relaxed. He looked as if he had never smiled in his life. Just as immovable as when Goulburn first saw him standing at the foot of the bed, he remained with folded arms, watching his prisoner as the latter reassumed his garments. His lips, once closed in a straight, hard line, looked as if they would never open again.

"Now follow me," this man commanded, as soon as he saw that Goulburn was ready.

He moved out of the room, and Goulburn followed him, raging in mind and heart at his own powerlessness to resist these indignities. The second man came after Goulburn at a pace's distance—he closed the doors behind them as they left the cell and its ante-room.

Traversing first one corridor and then another, all as silent as when he had first followed his guide from the waiting-room to his prison, Goulburn felt as if he were indeed in some modern Bastille, from whence there was no hope of escape. The dogged silence of his guard was not less horrible than the silence of the house; there was something sinister and threatening in it. Once more he thought of the awful effect this atmosphere of silence and this mystery of surroundings would have on Moira and Maisie.

The man who walked in front opened a door at the end of a narrow corridor, and revealed an elevator. He addressed Goulburn in the manner and tone of a drill sergeant—

“Step in!”

Goulburn stepped in; the two men followed. The lift sank. Twice it passed other doors—the house, then, must be of some height. Or—since on his first entrance he had only ascended one flight of stairs from the hall—were they sinking into the basement?

The lift stopped; the men got out. Again they placed Goulburn between them and set off along a corridor, carpeted as softly as those which he had traversed in the upper storeys. Coming to a door which Goulburn (who had been endeavouring to keep an accurate remembrance of the topography of the place in his head) noted as being on the left-hand side of the corridor, they entered an apartment which, from its arrangement and furniture, seemed to be intended for use as a board-

room. There was a table across the top end of this room, and along its farthest side were arranged three chairs, while chairs were set at either end. The side nearest the door had no chairs, but in the middle of the floor-space an arm-chair had been set as if in readiness for some one expected. As for the rest of the room, it was gloomy and sombre; panelled in dark wood from floor to ceiling, it was lighted by a single electric lamp, and there was neither picture nor ornament on the walls. But above the middle chair of the three which were ranged on the farthest side of the table there hung on the wall a black banner, whereon was embroidered the unmistakable sign of the pirate from time immemorial—a skull and cross-bones.

It gave Goulburn no surprise to see Dr. van Mildart sitting beneath this suggestive emblem; he had felt sure for many weary hours that his neighbour of Harley Street was at the bottom of this unheard-of outrage upon the liberty of innocent people. When he entered with his escort the doctor was writing, and did not immediately look up; Goulburn, directed by the men at his side to advance to the easy-chair, looked narrowly at the other occupants of the chairs beyond the table, wondering if he should recognise them. However, they were not known to him, nor could he gain much impression of them from their appearance. One, sitting on van Mildart's left hand, was an oldish man with a patriarchal beard, now almost white; the other, on his right, was a clean-shaven individual, rather portly and presumably of bland manners, who wore pince-nez, had

his hair parted in the middle, and might have been anything from a stockbroker to a company solicitor.

Goulburn's principal guard pointed him to the easy-chair, and again spoke to him after the drill-sergeant fashion—

“Be seated!”

The presence of other men seemed to communicate fresh courage to Goulburn—he gave his jailer a defiant glance, and replied sharply—

“I shall do no such thing!”

And folding his arms across his chest, he stood in front of the chair, staring at the three men at the table, and waiting until it pleased van Mildart to look up from his writing. That gentleman, however, appeared to be quite engrossed in what he was doing just then, and when he at last finished his task it was only to enter into consultation with his colleagues on either hand, who bent forward to examine the document which had occupied his attention. Finally, all three appended their signatures to this document, van Mildart last of all, and this done he placed it in a dispatch-box at his side, and for the first time bent his gaze upon Goulburn, who was regarding him with an expression of angry indignation.

“Well, Mr. Goulburn,” he said, with the same easy, careless manner which Goulburn knew so well and now loathed, “so there you are! I hope you have been well looked after and have had your proper meals! Let me advise you to be seated—we may find it necessary to have a lengthy talk with you.”

"I refuse to be seated, Dr. van Mildart," Goulburn replied. "I refuse to be coerced. I wish to know why I and my sister have been entrapped into this house and imprisoned here, and I demand our liberty. This is a vile outrage, and you will suffer for it."

"My dear sir," replied van Mildart, "don't be too hasty to prophesy evil. You wish to know why you are here. Because we will that you shall be here. Because we will that you shall do our pleasure. Because we are more powerful than you. Because you are in our power."

Whenever he said "we" he turned right and left to his colleagues, who bowed their heads in assent. Each watched Goulburn curiously, as the morbidly inquisitive watch a prisoner in the dock.

"You may have the power to do me an injury because you have trapped me," said Goulburn, "but you know exactly that you can only do that by using felonious means. You are a scoundrel, Dr. van Mildart."

"I quite believe that you think so, Mr. Goulburn. Opinions differ on various matters. A rat no doubt thinks that the man who entraps it is a scoundrel. Yet a rat is not half such dangerous vermin as you and the like of you," said van Mildart, with a perceptible sneer.

"That," said Goulburn, "is a remark which I do not understand. Tell me plainly why I am here and who are my captors."

"Certainly," answered van Mildart. "There is no necessity for concealment. You are in the presence, Mr. Goulburn, of the supreme executive (that is to say, the

president and the two vice-presidents) of a certain society, small in numbers but eminently powerful in its work, which is greatly concerned with the doings of persons who, like yourself, have much more money than they ought to have. Why you are here is, I suppose, made clear to you by that. You must pay ransom."

"In other words," said Goulburn, "I am in the hands of a gang of unscrupulous scoundrels, who mean to rob me?"

"Use what terms you please, my dear sir—they make no difference to us," replied van Mildart, with careless contempt. "We are not much concerned with words—hard facts and hard cash are much more in our line. I will be explicit with you. We are, as I have said, a small but tremendously powerful society, banded together for the express purpose of extracting as much money as possible from the pockets of those who have what we consider a superfluity. We have been in existence three years, with branches in London, Paris, and New York; and we have done very well—so well, indeed, that when we have effected our little coup with you, we intend to dissolve partnership. We——"

"You are, in fact, a gang of professional thieves and swindlers!" interrupted Goulburn.

"I dare say people who think as you do would call us so," replied van Mildart calmly. "The same terms are applied by Socialists to aristocrats and plutocrats. After all, it is a mere question of what one means by the use of certain words."

"You will get nothing out of me," said Goulburn.

"There you are wrong, because we shall. You are in our power—absolutely in our power. You are as securely immured in these walls as if you were in the deepest dungeons of a mediæval castle, or in the cell in which von Trenck spent the best part of his life, or within an iron cage on Devil's Island, with natives on land and sharks in the sea to act as jailers even if you got out of the cage. Understand me!" he concluded, in a menacing tone. "You are in our power! Power!"

Goulburn felt his heart turn sick. He tried, remembering all there was at stake, to maintain his composure and show a brave front.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that here in England—in the very heart of London—you can kidnap me in this way and hold me prisoner for an indefinite period? The thing's impossible—absurd! You'll have all Scotland Yard about your ears when we're missed."

Dr. van Mildart elevated his Vandyke beard; his colleagues smiled openly.

"That is amusing—but silly," said van Mildart. "It is precisely what will not happen. I repeat—you are in our absolute power. We can imprison you here as long as we like—much longer than you would like—and no one in this world would ever know. We can starve you. We can flog you. We can inoculate you with the germs of frightful diseases. If we please, we can kill you. Nobody will ever be the wiser. I say again—you are in our power. And"—here his voice took on a more significant meaning and a tone which made Goulburn shudder, though he strove to conceal it—"we have not

only got you, but we have got your sister, your sweetheart, and Mr. Christopher Aspinall."

Goulburn started at the mention of Christopher. He had been indulging in wild hopes that Christopher might do something to help when he found them missing under such strange circumstances.

"Aspinall!" he exclaimed. "He has no money!"

"No," replied van Mildart, "but he has a tongue. And so we deemed it wise to attach his person. Now, Mr. Goulburn," he continued, after a brief pause, "just let me give you a piece of sound advice if you don't want pain to fall on those you care for. If you won't hear common sense we must try physical suasion. We should begin with the women first, and——"

"You are a devil!" said Goulburn, with concentrated fury.

"We will not quarrel about words. But we should certainly begin first with the women. You see how helpless you are. It's all very well to gnash your teeth, clench your fists, and make lightning with your eyes, but you can't do anything. Every member of our society is a picked man or woman—we are all, I may tell you, ex-convicts of one country or another, and all adepts in our particular forms of art. One of us acted as coachman this morning; another as footman. Of our general calibre and disposition you may judge by the two gentlemen who guard you. I ask you—what can you do? Who knows where you are? Not a soul in this world—outside these walls. Do what is asked of you, and you shall have your freedom; if not, then you must

prepare for unpleasant things—very unpleasant things,” concluded van Mildart, with fresh significance of tone.

“If I agreed to whatever it is you propose,” said Goulburn, “you know that I should denounce you to the police.”

Van Mildart shrugged his shoulders.

“Even when you had done what we wish,” he said, “you would not have the opportunity of denouncing us to the police until we were every one of us safely beyond their reach. We are not fools, and our plans are always carefully worked out.”

The man with the white beard leaned across to van Mildart and spoke a few words which Goulburn could not catch. Van Mildart nodded, and turned to the prisoner.

“My colleague on the left,” he said, “thinks that we are wasting time, and that you are displaying a lamentable want of mental intelligence in not appreciating the situation, and he suggests that we should stimulate your faculties by an experiment or two on, say, your sister.”

“Your colleague is a worse devil than yourself,” said Goulburn boldly, “and will no doubt meet with his just deserts before very long, seeing that he is a hoary old scoundrel already.”

“There you are wrong,” said van Mildart pleasantly. “He is almost a young man, and got his white hairs through confinement in an underground dungeon in a European prison. But come—your answer.”

“You have not yet told me what you want,” said Goulburn.

"Ah, I believe you are right—I beg your pardon. I told you we wanted money, but I did not say how much," said van Mildart. "Now let me see—I will just go into that little matter."

As he spoke he drew a sheet of paper and a pencil to him and began to jot down figures. Presently he raised his head and looked at Goulburn with something of a smile.

"After all," he said, "I think we can afford to let you off very easily, Mr. Goulburn. In fact, considering that quite a short time ago you were a mere nobody with no prospects, content—or perhaps not content, but obliged to be satisfied—with a small weekly wage, and that your sister was a governess, not too well paid, I think we shall treat you handsomely. As for my niece——"

"You would help to rob your own niece!" exclaimed Goulburn.

"With all the greater pleasure because her father once robbed me," replied van Mildart. "As for my niece, I say she is in another category, having lived in luxury all her life. She, if things were levelled up, ought to scrub floors for the rest of her natural life. However, we shall lump all together."

He took up the piece of paper on which he had been scribbling, and began to tell off the figures with the tip of his pencil.

"Now, you, Mr. Goulburn," he said, "are worth considerably over half a million of English money. I have a fairly accurate idea of what you have spent since you came into your fortune, and I should say that what you

really can command at this present moment is about five hundred and thirty thousand pounds. I have put you down for that. Now we come to your sister. I happen to know exactly what she has because she is very subject to hypnotic influence, and——”

“I believe it was you who got that thousand pounds in gold!” burst our Goulburn indignantly.

“Quite right—it was,” answered van Mildart, imperturbable as ever. “I happened to need gold just then. Well, she can command two hundred and sixty thousand pounds in round figures—I have put her down for that.”

He paused and tapped the paper with his pencil for a moment before going on.

“Well,” he said at last, “my niece possesses eight hundred and ten thousand pounds in English money. Most of it was made by cheating, sweating, and stealing on the part of her father, my late brother-in-law. Some of it belongs to me; most of it, if everybody had his own, to poor folk whom he hurried into their graves in his effort to get rich quick. I do not think we shall leave my niece anything.”

“If you had your way—which you won’t have!”—said Goulburn, “I don’t suppose you’d leave any of us a single penny!”

“On the contrary, my dear sir,” replied van Mildart, “we propose to deal very handsomely by you—that is, if you are amenable to our commands. You and your sister have in your time worked for your living, and we think, being workers ourselves, that you have a right

to your reward. You shall have enough to live on in comfort, but not in foolish luxury. We object to millionaires or semi-millionaires. As for my niece, she deserves nothing, because she has never earned her bread in her life. However, I suppose you will marry her, so she will not starve."

"Will you be good enough to drop these remarks and put a definite issue before me?" said Goulburn.

"With pleasure. It is merely a question of fixing your respective ransoms—or, rather, we will lump them all together. The total wealth you, your sister, and my niece can command (irrespective of your house, Mr. Goulburn, a nice thing in itself) amounts to one million six hundred thousand pounds. We fix your ransom at three hundred thousand pounds—that will leave you and your sister one hundred and fifty thousand each. That is really handsome on our part. A hundred and fifty thousand each!—why, you'll easily get your six or seven thousand a year out of that."

"And what, pray, is Mr. Aspinall's ransom?" inquired Goulburn sarcastically. "You appear to have forgotten him."

"Not at all—not at all. We fix Mr. Aspinall's ransom at nothing. He is free to go—when you go," answered van Mildart.

"And supposing we decline to submit?" said Goulburn.

"In that case," replied van Mildart, in the politest manner but with a deadly positiveness that made his prisoner's heart throb, "we shall be under the painful

necessity of obliging you to submit. And, as I have previously remarked, we shall begin with the women first. You would not, I am sure, subject them to such pressure as we can bring to bear upon them—it would not be pleasant for them, Mr. Goulburn.”

Goulburn kept silence, striving to resist the temptation to leap upon van Mildart and throttle him.

“I think,” he said, “that I ought to have the opportunity of consulting with my fellow-prisoners before I give a definite answer to this proposal.”

The man with the white beard made an impatient movement; van Mildart shook his head ominously.

“Mr. Goulburn,” he said, “it is not for the conquered to make terms with the conqueror. Whatever you ask of us must be asked as a favour.”

“You regard us as conquered already, then?” said Goulburn.

“Precisely—because you are at our mercy. What we have delivered to you is our ultimatum. We want one million three hundred thousand pounds from you, your sister, and my niece,” said van Mildart, smacking the blotting-pad which lay before him, “and, what is more, we shall have it.”

“I cannot make my sister or your niece pay the money you demand of them,” said Goulburn.

“No,” said van Mildart, “possibly you cannot; but we can.”

The last three words were said with such dreadful meaning, were so pregnant with evil intention, that Goulburn now realised that no temporising, no putting

off, would do aught to soften these men or change their designs. He began to wonder if he and his companions in this perilous adventure were not the victims of madmen, whom various dire misfortunes had changed from men to fiends. Surely no men in possession of their faculties could be so barbarously cruel as the three sitting before him threatened to be.

"Let me speak to the others," he said again. "That, at any rate, is a reasonable thing to ask."

Van Mildart and his two associates put their heads together and spoke in whispers. It seemed to Goulburn, who watched them eagerly, that van Mildart was favourably disposed to letting the prisoners see each other, but that the other two were not. Each shook his head and frowned malevolently; the white-bearded man seemed to insist on some point with great vigour. At last van Mildart turned to Goulburn. "We are of opinion that your request cannot be granted," he said. "I may as well tell you that we have had both your sister and niece before us, and have delivered to them the ultimatum which we have delivered to you. They are therefore acquainted with our terms."

"And what was their answer?" asked Goulburn.

Van Mildart shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows.

"Women can be very obstinate," he said. "I regret, for their sakes, that they are at present inclined to resist our demands."

"Then so am I!" exclaimed Goulburn. "I refuse

entirely to be robbed by you. Do your worst. You can only kill us!"

Van Mildart sighed.

"Very well," he said. "However, we will try a little persuasion first." He looked at the two men who stood on either side of Goulburn. "Put each of the four prisoners on the twenty-four hours' coercive system," he commanded. "We will see at the end of that time if they are not more amenable to reason."

CHAPTER XI

MISS LAMOTTE

DURING that day the proceedings at the black house in Harley Street had been somewhat irregular and out of the common. First of all, Dr. van Mildart had gone away very early in the morning, leaving no word as to his return. Then Miss Lamotte, after receiving patients up to twelve o'clock, had peremptorily instructed Pimperry to inform any further callers that she could see no one else that day, and had gone out and remained out until nearly dinner-time in the evening. In the meantime, Dr. van Mildart had returned to the house about two o'clock, and was eating a hasty lunch when Mr. Christopher Aspinall called. A little later the doctor and Mr. Aspinall went away together, the former leaving a message with Pimperry to the effect that he might not be in until very late that evening, and that Miss Lamotte was not to wait dinner for him. Such of Dr. van Mildart's and Miss Lamotte's patients as turned up at the house during the afternoon had to go away disappointed. There was usually quite a crowd between four o'clock and six, and Pimperry, who was obliged to attend to the door now that Service was dead, had a busy time in sending people away. Then, close upon dinner-time, Miss Lamotte returned, and said that two

gentlemen were coming to dinner—a matter which only troubled Pimperry in so far as that he would have to do all the waiting himself. It made no difference to Miss Lamotte as regards this arrangement to hear that Dr. van Mildart might not be at home: she had the free run of the house, and it was an understood thing between her and its master that she should invite her own friends there whenever she liked to do so. Van Mildart's table was always lavishly spread—it made little difference if half a dozen unexpected guests came to it.

Any one who had spent that particular day with Miss Lamotte would have had ample opportunity for feeling amazed, puzzled, curious, and doubtful as to what that lady was really about. Her movements, actions, doings were all more than a little mysterious. When she rose in the morning she made a more than usually elaborate toilette of the going-out order, and she went down to breakfast in her hat. At ten o'clock came the first of the small army of callers, by appointment; the second arrived at a quarter-past, the third at half-past, and so on until at a quarter to twelve arrived a patient whom Pimperry had never seen before, and whose name, as given on her beautiful engraved card, was Miss Susan Dalrymple. Miss Dalrymple was shown into Miss Lamotte's room at once; the previous taker-up of her time had been shown out a good five minutes previously. Whether Pimperry observed it or not—and most people who looked at him would have sworn a solemn oath that they believed him incapable of observing anything—Miss Dalrymple certainly did not look like one who

suffers; she was a very pretty little woman, with smiling eyes and an arch expression, dressed in the height of fashion, and altogether a very bright and gay butterfly to flutter into a doctor's consulting room. There was a formal and ceremonious greeting between her and Miss Lamotte as they met, but when Pimperry had closed the door—which, like all the doors in that part of Dr. van Mildart's house, was so contrived as to be quite sound-proof—the conversation between the two ladies became unceremonious, not to say curt and sharp.

"Well?" said Miss Lamotte.

Miss Dalrymple, still arch and smiling, produced a sealed note from some invisible receptacle, and handed it over.

"This," she said.

Miss Lamotte took the note,—which any one who could have read it over her shoulder would have seen to be in cipher,—glanced it through, and then, lighting a taper which stood on her eminently business-like-looking desk, burnt it to ashes, which she thoughtfully pounded into fine dust with the end of an ebony ruler.

"I think that's all right," she said presently, having considered whatever the contents of the note were in silence.

"To-day, then?" said Miss Dalrymple.

"To-night," replied Miss Lamotte. "Of course I don't want to risk anything."

"Sure!" said Miss Dalrymple.

"And that's why I want to complete the final arrangements myself," continued Miss Lamotte. "After all I've

done, I'm not going to let things end in a mess just for the want of a little extra care."

"Of course," agreed Miss Dalrymple. She traced an imaginary pattern on the carpet with the point of her dainty shoe, and then nodded her head towards the door. "That him?" she asked laconically.

"Um!" said Miss Lamotte.

"Before my time, of course," said Miss Dalrymple. "Good to remember, though, I should think."

"Wasn't shaven in those days," said Miss Lamotte. "However—it's clear enough, his affair. Nothing to the other."

"Any message, then?" inquired Miss Dalrymple.

"Yes—say I'm in hand with everything for to-night, and that I'll call in during the afternoon. I shall want to see the chief, mind," said Miss Lamotte.

"Oh, of course," replied Miss Dalrymple. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said Miss Lamotte, and rang the bell for Pimperry. She rang it again two minutes later.

"Pimperry," she said, "I am obliged to go out to a serious case, and I may not return for some hours. You must refuse all further callers—I do not know when Dr. van Mildart will be in."

"Very good, madam," replied Pimperry. "Will you have the brougham?"

"No, thanks," said Miss Lamotte. "I'm going round to the chemist's in New Cavendish Street—I'll get a cab there."

A few minutes later Miss Lamotte left the house.

She certainly went into New Cavendish Street and made a brief call at the chemist's shop; but after that she walked some little distance in the direction of Oxford Street before she took a cab. And in the meantime, calling in at a little frowsy shop in a side street, a shop wherein all sorts of odds and ends were sold,—bits of old china and brass, dull pewter and faked engravings, second-hand books and dubious knick-knacks,—she asked for and received two letters which were most certainly not addressed to her in the name by which she was known in Harley Street.

Miss Lamotte's movements during the remainder of the day were, to say the least of them, somewhat erratic and peculiar. Arriving in Oxford Circus, she chartered a cab, and told the driver to take her to Westminster Abbey. Arriving there, she strolled about the cloisters for a little while, with the air of one who meditates amongst the tombs, but eventually went away down Victoria Street, where she disappeared within the doors of the office of the American Embassy. Coming away from this place an hour later, she walked across to the St. James's Park Station, whence she took train to the Mansion House. It was just the luncheon hour in the City, and the streets were swarming with men and youths. Miss Lamotte, in her smart West-End toilette and picture hat, all unconcerned at the admiration which she occasioned, made her way through the crowds until she came to a certain court opening out of Threadneedle Street, within the cool shade of which she was lost to sight for some little time. When she emerged upon the

street again it was in the company of a gentleman who was very immaculately hatted, garmented, and booted. With him Miss Lamotte entered an open taximeter cab and drove to the Savoy Hotel, where they lunched together in a shady corner of the balcony overlooking the river. They spent a long time over lunch and over the coffee and liqueurs which followed it, and they were engaged from first to last in very earnest and apparently extremely confidential conversation.

From the Savoy Hotel Miss Lamotte and her companion proceeded—this time in a closed carriage—to a certain department of Scotland Yard, where they were both lost to view for a considerable part of the afternoon. When Miss Lamotte went away it was by herself, and she took a hansom on the Embankment and drove to Bond Street, where she refreshed herself with tea and cakes at a fashionable establishment much in favour with ladies, and amused her mind—tired, no doubt, by a long day of business—in watching the people about her. Then she went for a drive in the Park, and thought everything was very hot and dusty, and that it was time the long-spun season came to an end. And finally she returned to Harley Street, and as she passed through the hall informed the butler that there would be two guests to dinner that evening.

It was then past seven o'clock, and at eight Miss Lamotte, who had made a very simple toilette, came downstairs and passed into the library. The guests arrived—two finely set up men, one bearded, the other clean-shaven, big enough for the Household Cavalry,

and bronzed as with much travel. Pimpery took their light overcoats, and showed them in to Miss Lamotte, who already was very well aware that Dr. van Mildart would not be in that evening, nor until well after midnight. They seemed pleasant gentlemen, he thought, as he waited upon them at dinner—scientific gentlemen who had travelled in some out-of-the-way places of the earth and seen a good deal. They, and Miss Lamotte too, dined very well indeed, and the gentlemen praised the wine and regretted Dr. van Mildart's absence.

Miss Lamotte and her two friends went into the smoking-room after they had dined, and Pimpery took coffee and liqueurs, and cigars and cigarettes there. Miss Lamotte sat in an easy-chair near the table on which the butler was arranging these matters; the clean-shaven gentleman occupied a lounge near her; the bearded gentleman was strolling casually around the room, inspecting the pictures—he got between Pimpery and the door. Pimpery presently turned round to hand him a cup of coffee; the cup fell from his hand with a crash. Two yards away from him stood the bearded gentleman, presenting a very wicked-looking revolver, down the barrel of which the butler looked with horror-stricken eyes.

“Put your hands up, my man!” said the bearded gentleman quietly.

Pimpery's hands, trembling as with a sudden attack of ague, went up above his head. He stared at his captor as if he were fascinated. The man with the revolver smiled.

"Not the first time he's thrown 'em up, I guess!" he said. "Go through him, Jim."

The clean-shaven gentleman rose from the lounge and went through the butler's pockets in a very knowing and professional way. He turned out his pockets, he ran his hands over his clothes, the butler liking it not at all. While this was going on the bearded person kept Pimperry covered with the revolver. As for Miss Lamotte, she, instead of betraying any surprise, took up her coffee cup and calmly sipped its contents.

"That's all right," announced the man named Jim.

The other man dropped his revolver and slid it lightly into his hip pocket. He pointed to a chair, nodding his head at Pimperry.

"Sit down," he commanded.

Pimperry dropped into the chair. It was evident that his nerve was gone; his face was becoming ghastly.

The bearded man picked up a decanter of brandy, smelled it, and poured out a small glassful. He put it into the butler's shaking hand.

"Drink that!" he said sharply. "Down with it!"

Pimperry drank and swallowed; some colour came back to his cheeks. But the fear on his face was dreadful to see. He looked from one to the other of the three faces before him pretty much as a rabbit might look when put into the cage of three hungry snakes.

The man with the beard turned a little aside—a deft movement removed his beard and whiskers. He turned, smiled sardonically, thrusting his face into Pimperry's full view.

Pimperry screamed—as a rabbit would scream at the snake's approach.

The two men laughed; Miss Lamotte, sipping her coffee, smiled.

"Mr. Macnaughten!" exclaimed Pimperry, as the scream died out.

Mr. Macnaughten laughed once more. He took up his coffee, sipped it, set it down again, and, choosing a cigar, lighted it and smoked with great satisfaction.

"Quite right, my man," he said. "I knew we should meet again." He turned to Miss Lamotte. "This is the man, right enough," he went on: "Phineas Thompson, sentenced to death for murder five years ago; escaped from Sing Sing while awaiting execution. Previous to that little affair one of the cleverest forgers in the States. That's a truthful statement, isn't it, Thompson?"

"Yes, sir," answered the captive. "It's—true. But it wasn't murder, Mr. Macnaughten—upon my soul it wasn't. He'd have killed me if I hadn't killed him."

"Very likely," said Macnaughten drily. "However, we aren't concerned about that. Now look here, my friend: we might be able to do a bit for you when we get you across—that is, if you do a bit for us. We want you to tell us all you know about this master of yours, van Mildart. It was he planned your escape from Sing Sing—eh?"

Over Pimperry's ashen face came a sudden change. His dead eyes assumed a terrible expression—they seemed to fill with blood and fire; and his arms and

hands became so agitated that both detectives tightened themselves up as if they expected an attack.

"Curse him!" the man burst out, in an explosion of rage which was all the more violent because it had been so long bottled up. "Curse him!—yes, he did manage my escape! I wish he'd left me where I was—I'd rather have gone to the chair than have gone through all that he's put on me. I've lived a living death here—and worse."

"Then he's—eh?" said Macnaughten significantly. "Here—take a drop more brandy."

Thompson, no longer Pimperry, sipped the amber-tinted liquid gratefully. He looked round him and smiled a little. His glance rested on Miss Lamotte, and he nodded to her.

"I'd an idea that you were after something, miss," he said, his smile broadening; "but I'm such a fool that I never thought it was me. I thought it was—him."

"I am after him," said Miss Lamotte. "Do as Mr. Macnaughten tells you—let us know what you know, and it will be the better for you."

Thompson shook his head.

"That's a big order, miss," he said. "He's the cleverest scoundrel I ever came across, and I've known some. But he keeps things to himself—you'll have hard work to circumvent him. He got me out of Sing Sing, that's true, and I wondered why at the time until I found that he wanted to make use of me. As Mr. Macnaughten there says, I'm a clever hand with the pen, and have done a good many jobs for him. You see, I'm under

his thumb. But I could have forgiven him that if he hadn't experimented on me."

"Experimented on you! What do you mean?" asked Miss Lamotte.

"It was before you came, miss," replied Thompson. "He gave me malarial fever once, and yellow fever another time—just to study the progress of the disease. And he's tried drugs on me a hundred times. Devil?—he's worse!"

"Now then, look here," said Macnaughten: "do you think he's anything to do with these recent jewel robberies? Several of them have been from his patients."

Thompson shook his head knowingly.

"I haven't a doubt of it, Mr. Macnaughten," he answered. "He's the cleverest hypnotist living—it's my belief he just hypnotised these women into handing their jewels over. But I don't know any more. That poor lad Service was trying to find out, though—I know that much. And it's my belief that he murdered Service the other night!"

"Murdered him! Um!" said Macnaughten. "Well, I don't see how that can be. The inquest's been held to-day, and the doctors all agreed that it was a natural death."

Thompson smiled—the unpleasant smile of one who believes he knows.

"He's clever enough to outwit any doctors," he said, "or coroners either. I do know this—we caught Service coming back from the house next door that night; and

whether he found out that he'd better silence him at once, or what it was, I don't know, but Service was dead next morning. And there was nothing wrong with him the night before."

Miss Lamotte and the two detectives looked at each other. After a moment's silence Miss Lamotte spoke.

"Look here, Thompson: do you know anything as to where he goes when he's out at nights?" she asked. "It's commonly supposed that you never go out, but I know you have been out—after him."

Thompson smiled at her admirably.

"That's clever of you, miss!" he said. "It is indeed. Yes, I have tried to track him, but never with success. He was always too clever, too slippery for me."

"Do you think he ever knew you did follow him?" asked Miss Lamotte.

Thompson shook his head.

"I couldn't say, miss," he answered. Then, suddenly changing his tone, and looking half-anxiously, half-sullenly at his captors, he said: "Look here: I want to know what you're going to do with me? Why should I tell you all this if I'm to get nothing out of it? If I'm to be taken over there for——" here he made a significant gesture—"why, I may just as well keep my tongue still."

"I told you that we might be able to do something for you if you helped us, Thompson," said Macnaughten. "As to what we're going to do with you at present—well, we'll have to take you down to Bow Street for an extradition order."

The man's face blanched and his great hands—hands whose muscular power Miss Lamotte had noticed hundreds of times as he waited at table—began to clasp and unclasp the arms of the chair in which he sat. His dull eyes grew angry, his mouth mutinous.

"I'm not an American subject, Mr. Macnaughten," he growled, "and I wish I'd never seen your country. Will they send me back?"

"I should say they will, Thompson. It was a bad business, you know," answered the detective. "But these things take a little time, and while you're waiting you'll perhaps be able to tell us a little more about your master—eh?" he added significantly. "And now I think we'll just be going down quietly."

He glanced significantly at the clean-shaven man, and the latter rising from his chair, finished his coffee, threw the end of his cigar away, and producing a pair of handcuffs, motioned to Thompson to extend his wrists. The prisoner growled ominously.

"Now then, no nonsense, Thompson!" said Macnaughten. "You can't do anything, you know."

"If I'd known you were coming," muttered Thompson, "I'd have taken good care you didn't find me as unprepared as I am."

"That's a foolish thing to say," said Macnaughten.

"I didn't mean anything against you, Mr. Macnaughten," protested Thompson, "I meant I'd have been dead. Those are a bit too tight," he added, looking down at his manacled wrists. "They hurt."

"Never mind—you'll soon be out of them," said

Macnaughten cheerily. "Now, it's already dusk, and I'll get a cab quietly. See to him, Robson. Here, Miss Lamotte, I want to speak to you."

Miss Lamotte and Macnaughten went into the library and closed the door. He looked at her narrowly, in silence.

"Are you going to try it?" he asked at last.

She nodded resolutely.

"It'll as likely as not cost you your life," he said.

She nodded again.

"I'm quite aware of that," she replied; "but I'll try it all the same."

"Well," he said, slowly and thoughtfully, "of course, if you've counted the cost—— However, it's no use discussing it now that your mind's made up. But remember—when he finds that you're a traitor, a spy, he'll shoot you!"

"How do you know I shan't shoot him first?" she asked, with a quick flash of her keen eyes. "Look at this, Mr. Macnaughten: I've wormed my way into his confidence to a tremendous extent already—all I want to bring off the grandest coup I've ever had in my life is the entrance to this place where he goes. I'll never run him to earth if it isn't to-night!"

"All right," said Macnaughten.

"See what I want is done," she said. "When I leave this house during the night see that I'm followed to wherever I go in such a fashion that not even he can detect it if he's with me. That's all—you know what to do later."

"I'll see to it all myself," he said. "There'll be half a dozen men close by now—I shall send Robson and two of them away with Thompson, and then I'll devote myself to you. But be careful."

"I've thought it all out," she answered. "It's the only thing to do."

Then Macnaughten and his fellow-detective took Pimperry very quietly and unobtrusively away, and none of the domestics downstairs knew that anything had happened. The butler had always been of strange habits, and if they thought anything at all about him that night, it was simply that he had gone to bed early. Before eleven, in accordance with custom, they were all in bed themselves.

Miss Lamotte prepared for a vigil, but first she had a slight errand to perform. Throwing a wrap round her shoulders, she picked up a blank envelope from a stationery case in the library, and letting herself out at the street door, walked to the pillar-box in Cavendish Square, the envelope in her hand looking to any one who met her in no way indistinguishable from a letter. She did not seem to do more than deposit her letter and turn back again, but the fingers which dropped the blank envelope into the slit made in the same movement a chalk mark on the red paint of the box.

Miss Lamotte went back to the house in Harley Street and sought her own room. There she made certain preparations—one of which included the cleaning and loading of a very business-like-looking revolver. Then she went downstairs into the dining-room and

drank a glass of wine and ate some biscuits, and then, refreshed, sat down in the dark, close to the window, looking out through the half-closed blinds.

Twelve o'clock chimed; half-past twelve; then one. The street was quiet except for the occasional passing of some belated pedestrian or of a carriage or motor-car. The night air, stealing in through the open window, was soft and warm; it would have made most people sleepy. But Miss Lamotte had never been so wide awake in her life.

Half-past one; the street entirely quiet. She kept her eyes perpetually fixed on one spot—the circle of dim light made by one of the lamps a little way down the opposite side of the street.

Into this circle a man suddenly came whom she knew at once to be van Mildart. As he crossed it he struck a match, which flared up for a moment, died out, and was tossed away. The man walked hurriedly on and disappeared up the street.

Miss Lamotte put down and fastened the window. A moment later she let herself out of the house, and after traversing several of the smaller streets on the west side of Harley street, came to a halt at the corner of Spanish Place. Van Mildart was there, smoking a cigarette in apparent calmness of mind.

"Well?" he said, as they walked away together.

"They've got Pimperry," she said. "Macnaughten was on his track. They've taken him off to Bow Street."

Van Mildart made no sign of astonishment, and for a moment he did not speak. Throwing his cigarette

away, he drew out his cigar-case, and selecting a cigar, lighted it with great deliberation.

"Macnaughten?" he said at last. "Um! He'll turn Thompson inside out."

"It's not safe to go back," she said suggestively.

"No," he answered. "No—I suppose it isn't. Um—it's rather unexpected. However, we must——"

He walked a few steps in silence and at last turned to her.

"I've trusted you a good deal," he said. "Now I shall have to trust you to the full. Remember, if you're false I shall kill you!"

Then, turning into Wigmore Street, he hailed one of two hansoms which stood on a rank in the centre of the road, and bidding Miss Lamotte enter, followed her into it and presently drove away eastward. A moment later, two men in evening dress came up to the other hansom, and after a short conversation with the driver, entered it and went off in the same direction.

CHAPTER XII

THE BRASS SWITCH

CUTTING across from Wigmore Street into Park Lane by way of Orchard Street and Grosvenor Square, the hansom cab which van Mildart and Miss Lamotte had hailed soon reached Hyde Park Corner, to which point the former had directed the driver to take him. As he was pulling up near the entrance to the Park, van Mildart opened the trap in the roof and gave him final instructions.

"Go across, and stop by the Tube station," he said.

Then turning to his companion, he remarked, with something of his usual easy and sardonic humour—

"This proves to be interesting. You have been followed from the house in Harley Street, and by the men in the cab behind us. Well, we will give them something to cudgel their brains with."

Considering that he believed himself to be followed, van Mildart acted with great deliberation on leaving his hansom. He took his time in getting out; he assisted his companion with great politeness; he was unable for the moment to find the exact amount of silver which he needed. The other cab came up, passed them, went on. They heard it stop farther down the road.

"Now we will walk a little," said van Mildart, "and set off in the direction of Kensington Gore. You are a good walker—we will step briskly."

Within thirty yards they met two men in evening dress. Each was smoking a cigar; each affected to be deeply interested in finding some particular mansion in St. George's Place. Beyond a mere glance at van Mildart and his companion as they passed them these two showed no concern in their business; they went on their way loudly disputing as to which of two numbers they wanted. Van Mildart sneered.

"Clumsy work!" he said. "You saw Macnaughten to-night?"

"Yes," replied Miss Lamotte.

"But you didn't see him again in one of those two? Well, that's one for him. I did, though; that's one for me. Now let us walk on slowly."

Behind them they suddenly heard a man's voice cry cheerily, "Well, good-night, old chap!" Then came rapid footsteps, and one of the men whom they had just met passed them, whistling a popular tune and swinging his walking-cane. He took no notice of them.

"Still clumsier!" sneered van Mildart, as the man disappeared in the gloom ahead. "All the same, we will exercise due care."

Walking onward at a quick pace, the two soon came in sight of Tattersall's corner, with Knightsbridge going to the right and the Brompton Road to the left. Van Mildart began to speak rapidly.

"Now listen to me carefully," he said, "and use all

your wits. We must separate here. I am going to call on a friend of mine who lives close by; before I do so, I shall put you in a cab, and shall tell the driver to take you to as far as the park end of Palace Gate. Arrived there, walk down Palace Gate on your left-hand side until you come to a small street also going away on the left. Turn down this as far as the fourth house, in the upper window of which you will see a light. Admit yourself with this latchkey—and remember, that house is empty. Count ten steps along the entrance hall, and you will come to a door which you will open with this second key. Once within that, feel on your right and turn up the electric light. You will then see that you are at the top of a flight of steps presumably leading to a cellar. Follow them down, and you will find yourself in a very small room. There you will wait for me. Is that all clear?"

"Perfectly," replied Miss Lamotte, who had strained every nerve to catch her mentor's instructions. "Perfectly."

"Very well, here we get a cab," said van Mildart, stepping across the road. "If you should be followed, you will be quite safe once you cross the threshold of the empty house—it would take a good deal to get through the second door, and there are two exits to the room beneath, as you will see when I presently arrive. Now get in."

As Miss Lamotte stepped into the cab a prowler, who looked little more than a bundle of rags, darted forward out of the shadows, ostensibly to open the door or keep

her skirts from the wheel. Van Mildart drove him back with an angry curse; the bundle of rags whined.

"Westward," said van Mildart, pointing towards Kensington. "Tell him when to stop as you go on," he added in a lower voice to Miss Lamotte. "Remember all—and be careful."

The cab drove away, and van Mildart, lingering on the road as he lighted a fresh cigar, watched its lights disappear. He suddenly made a rapid movement, which brought him to the side of the human pariah who was slinking into the shadows again.

"Here—you!" he said. "Are you hungry?"

The bundle of rags whined, almost whimpered.

"Hold out your hand, then," said van Mildart, as they came under the light of a lamp.

A hand stole out of the rags—a hand plump, soft, white, not badly kept.

"I thought so," said van Mildart. "Thank your stars I don't kill you, Mr. or Master Spy. Get! If you follow me down this road you'll be sorry for it. Quick!"

The bundle of rags drew back, cursing its own folly, and van Mildart marched swiftly away down the Brompton Road. Twisting here, doubling there, going down streets which seemed to lead nowhere, and occasionally going round a square in one direction only, to come back in another, he at last came out in a mews in the immediate neighbourhood of Palace Gate, and keeping well within the shadow of a high wall, went on until he came to a certain stable, the door of which he unlocked with a patent key. He stood listening for some

time before he fastened the door again. There was not a sound to be heard on the cobble-stoned pavement of the mews.

As for Miss Lamotte, she obeyed van Mildart's instructions to the letter, and soon found herself deposited at the park end of Palace Gate. There was not a soul in sight, and though it was barely a quarter-past two o'clock, there were signs that the short summer night was passing. For one moment, recognising the terrible danger to herself that lay before her, she wished that Macnaughten or any of his associates, or any of the men from Scotland Yard, were at hand, just for one whispered word; but she was so conscious of van Mildart's diabolical ingenuity that she felt sure that if they had been he would have seen them. No; she would have to do it alone. And yet—how could Macnaughten and the rest of them know where she was?

All these thoughts rushed through her mind in less than a second. She was sure that Macnaughten and his men had got off her track. Still, they might be on van Mildart's, which would do as well. She went swiftly down Palace Gate, hoping against hope for some small sign to show that her allies were in touch with her. But she saw nothing. Macnaughten's last words recurred to her. Well, whether it cost her her life or not, she was going through with it. She had been hunting van Mildart and his gang for three years of solid, constant work and watching. She felt that she must run him and them to earth now or never.

She reached the small street which van Mildart had

spoken of, and turned quickly along it. It was one of those little, insignificant thoroughfares which are often found in close proximity to fashionable streets and squares in London; it seemed to her that it was probably tenanted by grooms, coachmen, outdoor servants generally. Yes, there in the fourth house, as van Mildart had said, a light burned in the upper window. It had nice clean blinds that upper window; the window downstairs was furnished with white curtains, drawn well across it. There was nothing to indicate that the house was empty; on the contrary, it looked to be inhabited by people who took some care of it.

The door was flush with the street; in less than a moment she was inside the house, in the darkness of the hall. She stood there, panting and trembling, in spite of her determination, for a full minute. The little house seemed very still—still as empty houses only can seem still. Its stillness was almost uncanny. Nerves and Miss Lamotte were not considered by herself or her associates to be aught but agreeable to each other; she felt for the first time for some years that hers were inclined to be a little jumpy that morning. But Miss Lamotte had been trained in a hard school, and had faced various unpleasant things and gone through various trying episodes more than once during her career, and she presently pulled herself together, and prepared to go forward with the work she had in hand.

“Count ten steps along the entrance hall!”

She had not forgotten a word of van Mildart's instructions, and in the dark and somewhat narrow

passage in which she found herself, and would certainly not have dignified by the name of hall, she began to count the requisite number of paces, keeping her left hand outstretched before her, and her right hand in the pocket of her gown wherein lay her revolver. She came up against a door at the tenth, and began to feel for the keyhole. The second of the two keys which van Mildart had given her fitted this. She presently stood on the other side of the door, which closed behind her automatically, but with no more sound than the slight click of the latch. And now the silence was more profound than ever.

She felt, according to van Mildart's instructions, for the switch of the electric light, and soon found it and turned it up. A brilliant glare from a powerful lamp showed her a flight of some twenty steps which terminated in front of a door covered with green baize. Slowly descending the steps and pushing this door open, Miss Lamotte found herself in a small room which was lighted as brilliantly as the stairway. That it was some distance underground she knew by the number of the steps. That fact, however, interested her not at all; she was chiefly anxious to know what the place was used for. She began to examine it with a care that was more than equal to her curiosity.

The room was, as van Mildart had said, very small; Miss Lamotte, looking round it, conceived it to have been in its original state a small cellar which had subsequently been excavated to a considerable depth. She came to this conclusion because of its height, which

was out of all proportion to its other measurements. It was fully sixteen feet high, but not more than seven feet square. Its appointments were very simple and not a little strange. The walls were boarded from floor to ceiling in some dark wood; the floor was covered with a thick rug. On the left-hand side as you entered from the stairs was a small desk and one chair; on the right-hand side was a telephone, and beneath it a board on which were two or three buttons something like the buttons of an electric bell. Facing the green baize door was another—a door so remarkable in appearance that Miss Lamotte was immediately fascinated by it. It was not more than five feet in height nor than eighteen inches in width; obviously of steel or of iron, it was heavily padded with embossed leather.

And narrowly as she examined it, Miss Lamotte could not find anywhere on its surface any trace of a keyhole nor anything to show how it could be opened from the room in which she stood.

This fact made her think, and she suddenly turned, swung the green baize-covered door open, and ran up the stairs. A startling thought, a heart-chilling fear had crossed her mind. She wanted to know, there and then, if the surmise which presented itself to her was correct. In the keen light of the electric lamp she examined the door at the top of the stairs—like that in the room below, it was of steel or iron, painted over and heavily padded with leather, save for the rim; like that door too, there was nothing to show that it could be opened from inside.

She suddenly realised that, unless van Mildart opened one or other of the two doors from without, she was hopelessly trapped. And the thought instantly flashed across her mind. Had he meant to trap her? Was she to be kept prisoner there while he carried out some nefarious design? Or—did he mean to let her stop there until——? She did not care to think of what would happen to her left in a living tomb.

Miss Lamotte was no ordinary woman. Bred in an atmosphere of intrigue, familiar with the methods of the secret police in two continents, she had given her whole life and career to tracking down the cleverest class of criminal, and had been mixed in some notable cases. Ostensibly a physician, and one with a reputation, she had used her profession not only as a blind but as a means; and for some years she had been on the track of van Mildart, and had spent the money of at any rate two Governments in trying to get at that gentleman's inmost secrets. More than once she could have laid him by the heels for things which would have seemed very big affairs to the ordinary detective, but she preferred to wait for a big coup. It must be all or nothing—she meant it to be all.

But she reflected, as she went down the stairs again and sat down at the little desk to await developments, that van Mildart was one of those men who always seem to have a card up their sleeves when the last trick is apparently going against them. Had he tricked her now—at the last? It was certain that he had her safely trapped; she could not leave that place of her own will.

There she was—well underground, in what appeared to be a sort of strong-room. Van Mildart might come to her as he had said he would. Also—he might not.

An hour passed slowly away. Nothing happened. The silence became almost unbearable. She began, against her will, to imagine what it would be like to be left there for ever. Left there, at any rate, until——

She almost jumped off her chair as the telephone bell suddenly broke the silence with its shrill whirr.

Something—somebody—at last, anyway! She sprang eagerly to the instrument, and answered the call—

“Yes?”

Van Mildart’s voice came to her, clear, sharp.

“You are there?”

“Yes!”

“Listen carefully to all I say. The police are here!”

Miss Lamotte could have cried out with joy and satisfaction. Instead of doing so, she controlled her voice and merely said—

“Well?”

“They are not in the house yet, but they are all round it. I cannot think how they have got on the scent. It’s not Macnaughten’s lot, though—it’s the Scotland Yard crew. Something’s wrong.”

“What do you wish me to do?”

“You see a board there with three ivory buttons on it?”

“Yes.”

“Press the middle button.”

The board with the buttons was just beneath her;

Miss Lamotte unhesitatingly pressed a finger on the middle one. Behind her sounded a sharp click; then began the whirring of invisible machinery; then came another click. Turning round, she saw the small door slowly opening.

Van Mildart's voice came again.

"The door has opened?"

"Yes."

"Press the left-hand-side button."

Miss Lamotte obeyed the second order as readily as she had obeyed the first. Within the cavity which the opening of the door revealed a bright light sprang up. She looked within, still standing at the telephone. The interior into which she gazed seemed to be a sort of safe, some six feet in height and two feet across. On its farther side was a door similar in size and appearance to that which had just swung back on its hinges. There was nothing whatever to be seen in this cupboard or safe-like place but a glass disc, heavily framed in brass, which seemed, from where she stood, to be screwed to the wall on the left-hand side. Behind the glass something shone. She saw all this in a glance, and again she spoke.

"Yes—that is done."

"You see the glass disc?"

"Yes."

"It covers a switch. Do you see that behind the glass?"

"Yes."

"Have you a watch on you?"

"Yes."

"Put it exactly with mine—to the second. It is three-thirty-seven-forty-one."

Miss Lamotte adjusted the hands of her watch with steady fingers.

"Right."

"Now, attend. In exactly fifteen minutes from now unscrew that disc. One minute later turn the switch down, sharply. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"After that, wait there for me—I shall be with you a moment after. By the bye, did you get into the house unobserved? Was there any one about?"

"I saw no one. I am sure I was not seen."

"Good. Be ready for flight the instant I come to you. Do not touch the buttons again. Remember, the switch at three-fifty-two-forty-one. That's all."

Miss Lamotte put the receiver back on its crutch and took out her watch. She was as certain that something was going to happen as that she stood there counting the minutes. But what?

She glanced curiously at the glass disc glittering in the safe-like receptacle, the door of which now stood wide open. What would happen when she pulled that switch? The entire arrangement of the place suggested diabolical ingenuity, vast precaution, infinite care. Where did that farther door lead to? Probably, she thought, to some underground passage by means of which van Mildart would come to her. He, of course, would have the secret of opening the door at the top of the steps—he was most likely counting on this way

of making his escape. Where would she trap him? She chafed at the thought that any other than herself should have the credit or the glory of his capture, and yet he was so clever, and so slippery, and had evidently taken such pains in his contrivances, that she feared even now that he would be too much for her. And where was he? and what was he doing? And were the police in the house yet? Thinking of these things, and recognising that the game was going on and that she could see nothing of it, she ground her teeth with anger. Then she said to herself that that was no good, and bent down on the edge of the desk, watch in hand, waiting.

If Miss Lamotte could have seen into the room in the big house in Palace Gate wherein van Mildart was at that moment engaged, she would have been extremely interested. Most men of van Mildart's stamp know when the game is at its last desperate stage. He had more ways than one of reaching the headquarters of his gang unobserved, and had found no difficulty in gaining access to their most secret chambers; but a reconnaissance of the exterior had shown him clearly that something was afoot. Sharp as a ferret himself, he could detect other men who were equally sharp, and a few glances here and there told him that the house was being kept under strict observation, and that in all probability it would be raided before morning had fairly broken over London. Something had gone wrong—that was certain. It couldn't be through Pimperry, he said to himself, thinking of the butler by his recent name, for he was sure that Pimperry had not the ghost

of a notion of this place. Never mind: it mattered nothing now as to how it had been found out; what did matter was action—instant, immediate action.

There was an inner set of rooms used by the three men who were at the head of this gang, and only themselves knew the secret of entrance to them. In their very heart was a strong-room wherein the treasure was kept; for this van Mildart made with the directness of the savage whom necessity makes to know but one law—self. It was *sauve qui peut* now—nobody could appreciate that stern fact better than van Mildart. Let him lay hands on what he could and get away with it, and everybody else might go hang. He chuckled as he thought of what was going to happen in a few moments—he chuckled all the more when he thought of Miss Lamotte. But he cursed his bad luck when he remembered how near he had been to success in the case of the Goulburns and his niece.

Van Mildart worked fast and methodically in that strong-room. He knew where everything was that he could carry, and what papers there were which he could turn into cash. In ten minutes he had made an end, and he slipped out through the heavy door and closed it behind him, and, crossing a vestibule, entered the apartment in which he and his two co-directors (one of whom was supposed in everyday circles to be a stock-broker, and the other a professor of languages) had considered the case of Goulburn and his fellow-captives only a few hours previously. And then he was suddenly pulled up short, and his quick brain realised with

lightning-like rapidity that the crisis had come sooner than he had expected. For he found himself looking straight into the barrel of a big revolver, and the big revolver was held in the steady hand of the big man who had conducted Goulburn to captivity.

Van Mildart realised everything in a flash. Here was the traitor! He stepped back, and his hand sank into the side pocket of his blouse jacket. He had a revolver lying ready there, and he fired at an upward slant through the cloth as soon as his fingers grasped it—fired at the same time as his opponent.

The two shots rang out together.

The big man spun round, stared, clutched, went down in a heavy, blundering heap—shot through the heart. The bullet from his big revolver crashed into the woodwork of the door through which van Mildart had entered.

Van Mildart stood for a moment staring at the man he had killed.

“You fool!” he said at last. “You damned fool!”

Then he went over and kicked him in the face.

That done, he glanced at the clock, whistled to himself, turned—and hurried.

Sixty feet away, underground, Miss Lamotté, watch in one hand, the brass switch in the other, was also watching the seconds.

“—— thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty, forty——”

She pulled the brass switch down as van Mildart had instructed—sharply.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOLOCAUST

MISS LAMOTTE woke as one wakes from a heavy, dreamful sleep. There were memories of the dream still very vivid in her mind as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. It seemed to her that she had had at least a dozen dreams—no, a hundred. All these dreams had been about something that resolved itself into a crash. A tremendous steam-hammer had suddenly descended upon her and had squashed her out—flat. A giant had started up in her path, and with one swing of an enormous club had sent her whirling and twirling through hundreds of miles of space until she had collided in the most violent fashion with a great rock-bound mountain which sprang out of the sea to meet her. Some monster had picked her up and thrown her into the clouds, into the midst of a thunderstorm such as the world had never seen before—the thunder had deafened her, buffeted her, tossed her here, there, everywhere; the lightning had blinded her, burned her, before she dropped down, down, down into depths of awful blackness.

She opened her eyes as consciousness came back to her, and found herself in a huddled heap at the foot of the stairs with what seemed to be all sorts of wreck-

age lying all over her. Everything was in darkness; her mouth, nostrils, ears, eyes were full of dust, and there was a pungent, acrid odour in the place which was almost suffocating. Every bone in her body seemed to ache; her head was splitting with pain. Through the pain there gradually struggled the recollection that as soon as she pulled down the switch the whole world seemed to go to pieces about her, and that something smote her a violent blow on the head at the very instant that she was bodily dashed away.

Always a person of resource, Miss Lamotte felt in her pocket for the box of matches which she never forgot to carry there. She struck one and looked about her. The dust had settled down by then, and the smoke which had filled the place during her period of unconsciousness was curling in wreaths up the staircase. Everything in the place was smashed—the desk, the chair, the green baize door lay in splinters about her. The mysterious door which she believed to give access to some mysterious passage had been blown open—true enough, there was a passage behind it, and it was down that passage that the smoke with its pungent odour came. It was a horrible odour that—it caught her in the throat.

She knew now what had happened. The pulling down of the brass switch had fired some infernal machine, some powerful explosive, and at that moment there was no doubt some house lying in ruins, and very likely dead and dying people amongst the wreckage, while van Mildart, fiendish author of all the mischief,

had escaped her by fifteen minutes. She could have cursed him when she realised that he had not only tricked her, but had made her his cat's-paw.

She struggled to her feet and lit another match. A breath of air stole through the smoke and revived her, and gave her a sudden thought that was almost too good to encourage. She tottered up the stairs—thank God, the door had been forced open by the explosion! She got through it—collapsed in one of the chairs in the hall—fought her faintness down—and at last got into the street, and, supporting herself by the wall, made her way into Palace Gate.

All the neighbourhood seemed to be there—thronging, crowding, shouting, fighting to get near the wrecked house. The larger portion of the rapidly increasing crowd had evidently spared little time in making any toilet; most of the men and boys had snatched up whatever garments lay nearest to hand, and had run for the scene of the catastrophe, probably half-asleep and dazed, and only recognising in a vague fashion that something had happened. Even now hundreds of them were pushing aimlessly about, staring round them with wondering, uncomprehending eyes. Miss Lamotte, forcing her way into Palace Gate, caught fragments of the disquieted, amazed ejaculations of these people.

"It's an earthquake—I distinctly felt my house shiver."

"Shiver! I was thrown out of bed!"

Another man laughed—laughed like a man who

knows that in another moment he may possibly be shrieking with pain.

"Earthquake! A cataclysm, you mean. There'll be another in a minute, you'll see."

"Nonsense! You're frightened," said a contemptuous voice. "It's a bomb that's been exploded in the house there—where the smoke and dust's pouring out. I know. I once heard an explosion like this in Spain—Barcelona. This was louder, though."

Then, speaking very thoughtfully, the last speaker added—

"If there was anything alive in that house when that bomb exploded they'll be dead enough now. The house will be gutted."

"Nihilists, I expect," suggested some one.

"Not very likely in this country," said some one else.

That section of the crowd in which Miss Lamotte had become wedged had now forced its way to the front of the wrecked house, and a simultaneous murmur went up from its members as they gazed out at the scene before them. The front door had been blown into the road, and the cavernous-like hall beyond it was hazy with grey smoke and yellow dust. Every window had been shattered, and the woodwork hung from the casements in broken spars and splinters, while the glass lay all over the street. In the adjacent houses and in those facing them, scarcely a window-pane was left unbroken; behind every window and leaning over the window-sills were frightened women and children roused out of

their morning sleep by the thunder-like roar of the explosion. How powerful in its effects that explosion had been was shown by the presence in the walls of the house of two great cracks which ran from basement to roof in zigzag lines. There was a drifting wreath of smoke and dust above the chimneys, some of which had fallen, while others were shattered and forced out of place. High above this the summer morning sky was blue and placid.

There was already a numerous body of policemen on the scene; and others were coming up hurriedly, seeming to spring, as London police do on these occasions, from nowhere. They managed to push the people back, forming a semicircle in front of the damaged house. Miss Lamotte was pushed back with the rest, but she contrived to edge round until she came to an inspector, to whom she whispered a few words and showed a certain card, with the result that she soon found herself on the steps of the house. And at that moment some voice in the crowd without screamed one word that spread up and down the street with the swiftness of electricity—

“Fire!”

Glancing instinctively upward, Miss Lamotte and the inspector saw a tongue of scarlet flame, wicked and cruel in the clear sunlight, shoot out of an upper window as if it wished to cool its rage with a draught of the morning air. A puff of smoke followed.

“That’s what I expected,” said the inspector coolly. “However, the fire brigade and the salvage men’ll

be here directly. Ah! here's Macnaughten and some men whom you'll know."

Miss Lamotte turned to see a motor-car dash up to the foot of the steps. Out of it leapt Macnaughten and Christopher Aspinall, who were followed by other men, one of whom she recognised as Macnaughten's principal assistant; the other was a well-known Scotland Yard official. All four ran up the steps, open-mouthed with amazement at what they saw. And Christopher Aspinall's eyes fell upon Miss Lamotte. He sprang forward with a sharp cry and seized her arm.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "This is one of van Mildart's lot. Collar her, some of you. And what's happened? The house seems to have been wrecked. What is it? It was right enough when I left it half an hour ago."

"Let Miss Lamotte go, Mr. Aspinall. It's all right—she's one of us," said Macnaughten, and he stopped and whispered a word in Christopher's astonished ear.

"What is it, Miss Lamotte?" he went on. "What's happened?"

"He's blown the house to pieces," she answered. "And now it's on fire."

"Fire!" screamed Christopher. "But there's Dick and Maisie and Moira in there, I tell you! Locked up. I escaped—bribed one of the keepers, and got off to Scotland Yard for assistance. They'll be burnt to death. Here, I know where they are. This way!"

He began to fight his way along the marble-walled

hall, followed by the others. A stalwart policeman, already black and grimy, stopped them, shaking his head.

"It's no use, Inspector," he said. "There's nothing but a mass of rubbish at the end of the hall. The inside of the house seems to have collapsed altogether. If only this smoke would clear, we could see better. But there's no way along there."

Christopher almost danced with rage. He was about to dash out of the house when Miss Lamotte seized him by his arm and at the same time tapped Macnaughten on the elbow.

"There's a way in by the back," she said hurriedly. "Come round there with me—we may be able to get to them that way."

"Which side of the house are they locked up in, Mr. Aspinall?" asked Macnaughten. "Can you tell?"

"To the best of my belief, well at the back," said Christopher. "Come on, Miss Lamotte—show us where this way is."

The first of the fire-engines was just dashing up to the door as they went down the steps, and Macnaughten promptly secured the services of one of the men and bade him follow him. With the aid of the police, they forced a way through the crowd and got round to the narrow street. At the door of the little house from whence she had unwittingly fired the infernal machine Miss Lamotte paused and addressed the policemen who accompanied them.

"Keep everybody away from here," she said. Then, leading the way into the house and down the stairs to the secret chamber, she pointed out the passage, and continued: "I'm certain that this passage leads into the wrecked house, but whether you can get along it or not I don't know."

"I shall try," said Christopher resolutely. "My God! why, they'll be roasted alive up there unless that chap's released them, and he was well enough bribed. If I don't come back——"

"I'll go with you, sir," said the fireman. "You'll want help. Here, wait a moment."

He ran upstairs and presently returned with two policemen's lanterns, which he carefully lighted. Then he took out his axe.

"Now, sir," he said, giving Christopher one of the lanterns. "Let me go first; do you follow. I'm more used to this sort of thing than you are."

When he and Christopher had passed into the narrow tunnel Macnaughten looked at Miss Lamotte, having already looked carefully around the place in which he found himself.

"This is a queer place!" he said. "How did you find it out?"

"He got me into it," answered Miss Lamotte—"van Mildart. I believe now that he meant it to be my grave."

Macnaughten whistled.

"Too clever for you in the end then, after all!" he said.

Miss Lamotte laughed. Her laughter sounded somewhat queer—forced. Macnaughten looked at her, and saw that she had had a shock.

“I’m not sure that he hasn’t been too clever for himself,” she said, with a slight catch in her voice. “I think he miscalculated something, but I’m sure he’s dead—killed in the explosion.”

“Yes, that explosion. We heard it in Piccadilly as we came racing along. Who caused it? He?”

Miss Lamotte pointed to the remains of the glass disc and the brass switch. “I did it,” she answered—“unconsciously, of course.”

She rapidly told him of the events of the evening. Macnaughten listened carefully and nodded his head at certain points.

“He’s been interrupted in whatever it was he was after,” she said. “Probably by the man whom Aspinall succeeded in bribing. And——”

At that moment Christopher’s voice came booming through the tunnel—

“There are stairs here, and the fireman says they are all safe, right up to the top, where there is a door. Are you coming?”

“Let us go,” said Miss Lamotte, and passed into the narrow opening, followed by Macnaughten. “We may be of use.”

They had to make their way forward in a crouching position for what seemed a considerable distance but was really some twenty yards. At the end of the tunnel, in an enlarged space, they found Christopher

throwing the light of his lantern on the lower steps of a stone staircase. Above them they heard the fireman dealing repeated blows upon a door with his axe. When they were half-way up the stairs the door went in with a crash. A pungent, acrid odour swirled down to them accompanied with wreaths of smoke, but they struggled on, and presently stood in a room through a broken window of which came a welcome gust of air.

"Now for it!" said Christopher, making for a gap in the wall on the other side of this room, which was in a state of wreckage. "They're on this part of the house, I'm sure, though I can scarcely tell where—they've so many passages and corridors here. Ah! here's a sight!"

They had passed into the room in which van Mildart and his two colleagues had sat in judgment on Goulburn the previous evening, and where he had found his flight suddenly arrested by the traitor's revolver. This room, now a mass of wreckage, was horrible to look upon. Its furniture, pictures, ornaments had been blown into infinitesimal fragments. There was a hole in the ceiling big enough to allow for the passage of a balloon; another in the floor, which revealed further wreckage in the apartment below. A flapping window-blind had been riddled as with scores of bullets; curtains, blown out like sails through the devastated casements or the gaps in the walls, were streaming to the wind outside. Scarcely a yard of the flooring remained intact; they had to pick their way over the beams and girders.

"The fire isn't on this side of the house," Macnaughten was saying. "Quick, Mr. Aspinall—we may get them out before it spreads this way. Where are they?"

That was not so easy a question to answer. The house, very large in itself, seemed to be a veritable warren of small rooms in that particular part of it. Some of the doors of these rooms had been blown open by the explosion; others remained fast, immovable; the fireman's axe failed to break them in.

"And I can't tell if they're in there or not!" groaned Christopher. "It was out of one of these places that I was released, but the fellow took me round such corners and down such stairs that——"

"Here's somebody!" exclaimed the fireman, who, being ahead, was the first to turn into another corridor. "Injured, too!"

"It's Dick!" exclaimed Christopher, dashing forward to where Goulburn lay, half-propped up against the wall, half-recumbent on the floor of the corridor.

"Surely he isn't dead!"

"No!" said Macnaughten, who had immediately dropped on his knees at Goulburn's side. "He's had a knock. Here, hold him up, and I'll give him some brandy—he'll come round."

But when Goulburn came round he was still dazed, and it was some minutes before they could get any coherent words out of him. They made out at last that when the explosion occurred he was hurled violently against the wall, and lost consciousness. On coming

to, he found that the doors of the room in which he was locked had been forced open, and he had immediately set out to find Maisie and Moira, only to grow faint in the corridor and to become unconscious again. He was not sure that he had not got up again, wandered about, and again become unconscious. And he had not the least idea as to where the girls were.

On hearing this, Christopher became half-wild with anxiety and impatience. He ran from door to door, shouting the names of the two girls at the top of his voice, while the fireman, more systematic and accustomed, made a thorough, if more leisurely, search. Most of the rooms were open; all were empty.

Christopher, darting this way and that, lost himself. He ran up side staircases and down back staircases. Twice he opened doors leading to the front of the house, and was immediately aware that fire was raging there. He made haste to shut them ere the flames licked through. Finally, he made his way to the garret, and so to the roof. And there, crouched against a stack of chimneys, wide-eyed with fright, and obviously incapable of doing anything for themselves, he found Maisie and Moira, who at sight of him burst into incoherent sobs of thankfulness, and hastened to clasp his arms, hands, and neck.

That Christopher was something more than thankful to see his sweetheart and his friend's sweetheart safe from anything but fright goes without saying, but the uppermost thought in his mind at that moment was that here was a nice little job for one small man to

carry out. Maisie was laughing and crying in a breath, and held him so tightly that he was afraid he would never disentangle himself from her grip. Moira, after the first outburst, was quiet, but her face was very white and her eyes full of fear. Christopher pulled himself together.

"Now, girls," he said, "we've got to get out of this. Moira, pull yourself together. Dick's safe downstairs. Now, Maisie, leave loose, and follow me. Come after her, Moira."

But Maisie shrank from what might be downstairs. The two girls, flying anywhere in their panic of fear after the explosion, knew that the house was on fire, and had gone higher and higher under the impression that there was no escape beneath them. And Maisie screamed at the notion of facing the burning mass beneath, being unaware that so far the fire was confined to the front part of the house.

"No, no, Chris!" she cried, holding back as he tried to draw her to the stairs. "I daren't!"

"Well, you've just got to!" said Christopher, with determination. "If you won't, I'll make you."

"Do what Christopher wishes, Maisie," urged Moira. "Go along, Christopher. I'll come quietly."

He got them down the stairs to the garrets; then to the next floor. And then, opening a door, he realised that there was no escape that way. Whether it was that some one had opened doors in the lower storeys, or that the fire had eaten its way through, there was a

perfect hurricane of lurid flame coming up the stairs, and the air was already reeking hot.

Christopher said "God help us!" under his breath, and dragged the girls back into the room they had just quitted. He made for the windows, the glass of which had been blown out, and climbing through one of them, found himself on a parapet at a great height from the street, in which by that time a vast crowd had assembled. His heart sank within him as he looked down—he and his charges seemed to be so far away from help. But as he stood up on the parapet they saw him from below and began to make preparations for his rescue.

There was another and a broader parapet on the floor beneath, and the escape, when it was at last run up, only reached to this. A fireman lifted an anxious face to Christopher.

"Can't you get down to this floor, sir?" he said. "The fire's not up to it yet."

"It's on the stairs," said Christopher. "Wait!"

He climbed through the window again, and running to the door, looked down the well of the staircase. There was a volume of smoke pouring up and a rising shower of sparks. Could they do it in a wild rush?

Christopher beckoned the two girls to him. He looked at Moira with an appealing recognition of her courage.

"Now, then!" he said. "We've got to get down those stairs—only a dozen of 'em. Run, Moira!"

Then, without giving her time to protest or to struggle, he snatched Maisie up in his arms and made a dash through the curling smoke and the flying sparks, and burst open the door of the room beneath with a vigorous kick. The smoke and the sparks were licked in after them as he and Moira ran for the window.

From the street beneath a great cheer went up as Christopher, still carrying Maisie, appeared on the parapet. Christopher scarcely heard it; he went through certain things as if he were in a dream until a few moments later he found himself and Goulburn, now restored but still dazed, and Moira and Maisie, all safely bestowed in a neighbouring house with commiserating faces around them. He began to feel very light-headed and to show a desire to laugh.

"I—I didn't think Maisie could have been so heavy!" he said. "I——" Then, in spite of himself, Christopher collapsed, and had to be taken care of.

The house burnt itself out—with all its black secrets. Macnaughten and Miss Lamotte, having got Goulburn safely out of it, watched the work of destruction go on, and tacitly agreed that fire was the best thing to cover over so dark and mysterious a headquarters of crime. Unknown to them, there were those in the watching crowd who could have told wonderful things of what had gone on in the rooms and chambers which the scarlet flames were rapidly eating—especially a venerable-looking person with a snow-white beard, and another, who passed him more than once without showing a sign of recognition, and who might have been

some well-to-do barrister or professional man. These two were wondering what had really happened, and where their colleague was—so too wondered some other birds of prey going in and out, under the guise of highly respectable citizens, amongst the watching crowd. And they cursed their luck under their breath.

Miss Lamotte broke a long silence.

"Well, he was too much for me in the end," she said. "I didn't get him."

Macnaughten's stern face relaxed into a grim smile.

"All the same," he said drily, "he's caught—at last!"

Miss Lamotte sighed.

"Knowing him as I do," she said, "I can scarcely believe it!"

Later in the morning they all returned to Harley Street. Miss Lamotte and Macnaughten went to van Mildart's house. The housekeeper was at the open door. They saw at a glance that she knew nothing of what had happened.

"Of course, you haven't seen your master this morning?" said Macnaughten.

The woman stared from one to the other in sheer astonishment.

"Dr. van Mildart, sir? Oh yes—it's not ten minutes since the doctor left the house!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE FOX-HUNT BEGINS

MACNAUGHTEN dropped into a chair in the hall and stared at the housekeeper as if he could neither credit her word nor his own senses.

"You don't mean to tell me," he suddenly burst out, "that Dr. van Mildart has only just left this house—this very house?"

"This very house, sir—his own house," replied the woman, with some show of asperity; "and as I said, not ten minutes ago."

Macnaughten turned his wondering gaze upon Miss Lamotte and seemed about to burst into a fit of laughter, which in a woman would have been called hysterical, but checked himself, and starting to his feet, made for the door.

"Which way did he go?" he exclaimed. "Who let him out? Did any one see him go up the street, or down the street, or——?"

"The first thing to do," said Miss Lamotte, quietly interrupting him, "is to find out what he did while he was here."

"Yes, yes!" said Macnaughten. "You're right. To tell you the truth, I'm so surprised, so amazed,

that——” He broke off, and turned abruptly to the housekeeper. “What did he do while he was here in the house? Where did he go? How long was he here? Come!”

The housekeeper, who was a highly respectable person with considerable ideas of the dignity of her position, regarded Macnaughten with an expression in which resentment was mingled with wonder.

“Well, really, sir!” she exclaimed, “I don’t know that it’s any part of my duty to explain my master’s movements to you or to anybody else. But since you’re so insistent, I may say that as Mr. Pimperry left the house last night and has not returned, and as we have no footman just now owing to Service’s death, Dr. van Mildart was not likely to be seen by anybody much, for he admitted himself, of course, and the servants were all at their respective duties. However, I did happen to see him as he was crossing the hall, and told him that there had been several patients to see him; and he replied,” continued the housekeeper, with a significant glance at Miss Lamotte, “that neither he nor Miss Lamotte would be available for consultation to-day. Then he went into his private study, where no one is ever allowed but himself, and stayed there perhaps a quarter of an hour, and came out with the bag which he carries when he goes on visits, and went away. And if there’s any mystery about it”—this with another glance at Miss Lamotte which was even more significant than the first—“I should like to be told of it; for what with the death of the footman and the dis-

appearance of the butler, I feel that my nerves are being affected."

"The fact of the case is, Mrs. Blashfield," said Miss Lamotte, "Dr. van Mildart has committed a very dreadful crime, of which you will soon see accounts in the midday newspapers. This gentleman is a detective; and—since you may as well know it now as later—so am I. I have been keeping an eye on van Mildart ever since I came here. That was why I came. Now, then, can you tell us anything of which direction he took when he left the house?"

Mrs. Blashfield's countenance underwent several changes while Miss Lamotte thus addressed her. Her final expression signified that she had always known that there was something queer and underhand about the vanished Dr. van Mildart's lady assistant.

"I'm sure I can't, miss," she answered. "I heard the door close after him, but whether he went up or down I can't say."

"He's well known to all the cabmen about here," said Miss Lamotte, turning to Macnaughten. "Let's get to work. Send for assistance."

"I'll have a small army on his track in half an hour," responded Macnaughten. "Where's the telephone here? Oh, there. Now then, do you get to work on the one next door. Get on to the Press Association and the Central News and tell them that van Mildart was not killed in the smash, and has visited his house in Harley Street since and left it again. Describe him minutely,

and tell 'em to get all the papers to get out specials with his description in big type. I'll get on to the police. Let's hustle—the old fox hasn't got much start."

So the house in Harley Street became transformed into a sort of police bureau. Important men came hurrying up from Scotland Yard and sent men of lesser importance scurrying all over London. Over London itself the news of the Prince's Gate affair spread like wild-fire. Edition after edition of the papers came out, giving more or less accurate accounts of what had happened: printing the description of van Mildart in huge letters; speculating on what particular nest of crime it could have been that was set up in the wrecked house; and containing graphic and startling accounts of the way in which the two Goulburns, Moira Phillimore, and Christopher Aspinall had been enticed there. To tell the truth, most of these accounts were worked up by rapidly working reporters from very meagre details, for Moira and Maisie were in something like a state of collapse after their experiences, and could answer little to the questions put to them by those who, with great difficulty, obtained an interview with them, and Richard and Christopher, still excited and overstrained, could do little more than give a general impression of the events of their captivity. But by early afternoon the public, by piecing together the scattered and somewhat incoherent accounts which appeared in every newspaper, was able to make out the following facts:—

1. That Dr. van Mildart, the famous nerve specialist of Harley Street, was also the head and moving spirit of a secret gang of dangerous criminals who had their headquarters at what had been supposed to be a first-class nursing home in Prince's Gate.

2. That the proceeds of many depredations upon private individuals in society were kept at those headquarters, and that van Mildart had so arranged matters that in the event of his finding himself in a corner he could possess himself of them for his own separate advantage and destroy the whole place by means of some infernal machine which he had made Miss Lamotte his cat's-paw in firing.

3. That the unexpected arrest of Pimpery had caused him to decide that there was then nothing left for him but a speedy retreat, and that he had taken advantage of his own cleverly executed arrangements to possess himself of whatever he and his confederates had secured, and had escaped by some secret method of retreat only known to himself.

4. That he had meant Miss Lamotte to perish in the general debacle, evidently believing that the effect of the explosion would extend to the secret chamber in which she was confined.

5. That van Mildart was now at large, and in possession of whatever booty he had carried away.

What that booty might exactly be was a question which largely occupied the minds of those who were very anxious to catch the *ci-devant* Harley Street specialist. In the opinion of Miss Lamotte, who was

better qualified to speak on the matter than any one, it would certainly include the Maxton diamonds, and probably the results of similarly well-planned robberies perpetrated on other ladies who had come under van Mildart's influence. All these matters, enormously valuable though they were, could be packed into small compass and carried away. Then there would be van Mildart's own legitimate earnings, which, as Miss Lamotte well knew, had been enormous. No one knew better than she of the tremendous fees which had been paid him—he must have earned, she said, some twenty-five thousands of pounds a year during his brief period of extraordinary popularity.

"Where did he keep his banking account?" asked one of the inspectors from Scotland Yard.

That was a question which no one could answer.

True, it was known that he had kept an account at a bank in close proximity to his house, but a brief inquiry soon established the fact that it had simply been kept for the purpose of paying such matters as rent, rates, taxes, wages, and providing for ordinary daily expenses. No great sum had ever been paid into it, and the balance was insignificant. It appeared to have been his custom to pay in so much money in notes once a month—none of the cheques paid to him by his wealthy clients had ever been passed through it.

"We knew of course that Dr. van Mildart was a very wealthy man," said the manager, "and we always supposed that he kept his principal account elsewhere—

this we regarded as a mere household account, though it was a fairly heavy one."

Nor could any clue be obtained as to what he might have carried away in this particular respect by inquiry at the banks on which his clients had drawn cheques for his fees. The Countess of Maxton, for example, had given him several cheques at various times—at his own particular request they had in every case been made payable to bearer and cashed by himself over the counter in notes. Where, then, had he hoarded his earnings?

"Of course the notes can be traced," said Macnaughten. "They'll have been presented at the Bank of England from time to time. The probability is that he's sent his money out of the country. One thing's certain—he's got off with a considerable amount of wealth in one form or another. How much it amounts to—— Ah, well, let's wait a bit! We shall hear more."

It was not very long before they did hear more. In the course of the day a hansom came dashing up to the house in Harley Street, and a stoutish gentleman, very red of face and obviously in a state of high excitement, jumped out, ran up the steps at a speed which did his agility great credit, and inquired, without preface or a single clearing of his throat, if he could see Miss Phillimore at once. Miss Lamotte and Macnaughten, who were engaged in receiving reports from various quarters, saw him, and said that Miss Phillimore was next door and indisposed, and explained who they were.

"I must see her at once!" exclaimed the newcomer. "I—I have just seen the newspapers, and I say I must at once see her. You understand? I am afraid there is something seriously wrong. The fact is, I am Mr. Cowden, of Cowden & Brooker, jewellers—you know, eh?—Bond Street, you know. Well, some time since Miss Phillimore entrusted us with a very valuable set of jewels—chiefly pearls and diamonds—which she wished reset. She was brought to us by her uncle, Dr. van Mildart, of whom I grieve to say I have just read such a dreadful account—an account which I hope is not true, by the bye?"

"True enough in the main," answered Macnaughten. "Pray continue, Mr. Cowden."

Mr. Cowden mopped his high forehead. He was palpably perspiring from sheer fright and anxiety and horror.

"Those jewels have been finished two or three days," he said. "They were lying at Miss Phillimore's disposal—in our safe, of course. And now—well, van Mildart's got them!"

"Van Mildart's got them!" exclaimed Miss Lamotte and Macnaughten in one breath.

"Impossible! How should he get them?"

"He has got them," answered the jeweller, again mopping his brow. "He got them this morning—called for them first thing."

"And you handed them over?"

"Of course we did! He produced his niece's order, with her own signature, which we recognised. We be-

lieved in him, too, as a thoroughly respectable, honest man," groaned Mr. Cowden.

"Let us see the order," said Miss Lamotte.

The jeweller's trembling fingers produced a letter-case from the inside pocket of his frockcoat, and from several papers which it contained drew out one which he held up before the eyes of the two detectives. Miss Lamotte gave one glance at the signature, and nodded her head.

"I believe that's genuine," she said. "Indeed, I'm sure it is."

Mr. Cowden sighed with relief.

"We took it to be so, ma'am," he said. "We've often seen it."

"What was the value of those jewels?" inquired Macnaughten.

"Our estimate of their value," replied Mr. Cowden, with a perceptible emphasis on his first words, "was at least fifty thousand pounds."

"Well," said Macnaughten, "let's go next door and show Miss Phillimore that paper and see if she can account. And he scooped the whole lot, you say?"

"We had no option but to deliver the jewels to him," replied Mr. Cowden. "You will observe that Miss Phillimore desires us to hand over the jewels to her uncle, Dr. van Mildart, and adds that he will settle the account for the resetting. It was all in order."

"Did he pay for the resetting?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly! We gave him our proper form of receipt."

"How did he pay—by cheque?"

"No—he paid in Bank of England notes."

Macnaughten stroked his chin.

"He's no ordinary man," he said. "He must have waited about somewhere until your place opened. By the bye, how was he dressed, and was he carrying anything?"

"He wore a dark morning suit, and he carried a brown leather bag—something like a brief bag, but larger," answered Mr. Cowden.

"Must have breakfasted quietly somewhere while waiting for your place to open," said Macnaughten reflectively. "Do you remember how he went away?"

"Yes, he went in a cab which I hailed myself from the corner of Grafton Street, and I heard him tell the driver to go to the Cavendish Square end of Harley Street," replied the jeweller.

"Cool as a cucumber and sharp as a fox," said Macnaughten. "Timed everything to a nicety. Well, let's go next door."

They found quite an assemblage in Richard Goulburn's library. There was Richard himself and Christopher, centres of groups; there was Mr. Conybeare and his wife, profoundly sympathetic with Maisie; there was the Countess of Maxton, talking thirteen to the dozen to Moira; there was the Earl of Maxton, lounging near the fireplace, pulling his moustache, and occasionally making remarks to himself; there were two lady journalists, very anxious to interview the heroines of this terrible adventure; there was a jour-

nalist, who, unable to get any one to talk to him, was making copious notes about his surroundings. Everything was Babel and confusion, and Moira and Maisie looked very weary.

The entrance of Miss Lamotte and her two companions caused a temporary silence, and Richard hurried forward to ask if there was any further news.

"Yes," replied Miss Lamotte, indicating Mr. Cowden, who was bowing his respects to the Earl and Countess as old customers of his, "it turns out that Dr. van Mildart called at Messrs. Cowden & Brooker's, in Bond Street, this morning at ten o'clock. I am sorry to say, Miss Phillimore, that he obtained the diamonds and pearls which you left there to be reset."

Lord Maxton uttered a loud exclamation.

"More diamonds, begad!" he rapped out. "D'yah hear that, Dolly?—he's got Miss Phillimore's diamonds now. The fellah must eat diamonds, begad! I should ha' thought he'd got enough diamonds to last him his life when he got yours. Eh—what?"

"If he did get them, Freddie," sighed Lady Maxton, who was disposed to be tearful.

"'Course he got 'em!" declared the Earl. "No doubt about it. Clear case, after all one hears now, begad! Got Miss Phillimore's now, you see. Mad on diamonds—dotty on 'em."

"But I don't understand," said Moira, looking from one to the other. "What is it, Mr. Cowden?"

"I can assure you it was all in order, Miss Phillimore," replied the jeweller, with some agitation. "We

are very particular in our business in doing everything in order—indeed, we are obliged to be, considering the valuable nature of the matters entrusted to us.”

“Diamonds very valuable things, yah know,” said Lord Maxton, looking solemnly round the company. “Worth a lot o’ money. Ours were worth two-fifty thou. Um! Wonder if we shall ever see ’em again. Fear not, begad—do indeed!”

“And as I was saying,” continued Mr. Cowden, who had listened with great deference to his lordship’s words of wisdom and had bowed business-like approval of every one of them, “as I was saying, all was in order. You called some time ago with your uncle, Miss Phillimore, to instruct us as to the resetting of your diamonds and pearls, and a few days since we wrote to inform you that the work was done——”

“I never received your letter, Mr. Cowden,” said Moira.

Mr. Cowden’s eyebrows went up.

“I assure you it was sent,” he replied. “I wrote and posted it myself.”

“To the house next door?” she asked.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Cowden. “I knew of no other address.”

“When would it arrive here?” she asked further. Mr. Cowden considered.

“Some time yesterday,” he replied.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “that accounts for much. Well, go on.”

“This morning your uncle called for the jewels, and

showed us your formal order for the delivery to him. Here it is!"

Moira, looking very mystified, took the paper which the jeweller held before her and gazed at it earnestly. She shook her head.

"That is your signature, is it not?" asked Mr. Cowden anxiously.

"Yes," she answered, "it is my signature; but I never authorised the writing of such a letter. It is another trick."

They all crowded round her to look at the sheet of paper which she held in her hand. It was a small quarto sheet, such as is generally used for typewritten letters, and was stamped with van Mildart's Harley Street address in heavy black relief. The body of the letter was in type-script, and was a mere formal instruction to Messrs. Cowden & Brooker of New Bond Street to hand over to Dr. van Mildart the jewels entrusted to them for resetting. Then at the foot of the sheet appeared Moira's usual firm, bold signature. No one there who was acquainted with it would have doubted its authenticity.

"That is my signature," she repeated, "but I can't think however it came to be appended to this letter. I should never have dreamed of allowing any one but myself to receive those jewels from you, Mr. Cowden. They were all given to my mother by my father, or by my father and mother to me. And now, to suppose they're—lost."

"Mons'ous shame, begad!" exclaimed the Earl. "Wish we could lay hands on the fellah, eh?"

Poor Mr. Cowden seemed inclined to wring his hands in sheer despair. Instead of doing so he mopped his forehead.

"You cannot conceive how pained we are, Miss Phillimore," he said. "It's the most awful calamity that has ever happened in our business, long-established as it is. But your signature, Miss Phillimore, your signa——"

"Oh, I don't think you are to blame in the least, Mr. Cowden," she made haste to say. "That is my signature, and I don't see how you could do otherwise than as you did, considering that you had every confidence in Dr. van Mildart—as, indeed, we all had at one time."

"Not me!" protested Christopher, whose sense of indignation was stronger than his love of grammar—"at least, not after I got to know him."

Goulburn was examining the sheet of paper which Moira had handed to him.

"Can you think how your signature came here, Moira?" he asked.

She shook her head at first; then an idea seemed to strike her.

"I have signed papers which Dr. van Mildart has witnessed when I first came to London," she answered. "Business things, you know. It is possible that he may have arranged papers so that I signed that, and that he kept it and had it filled up afterwards."

"It has been done on one of his typewriters, I sup-

pose?" asked Macnaughten, examining the lettering.

"Yes, on the one he had in his study," answered Miss Lamotte. "I saw that at once."

"A clever scoundrel!" said somebody. Then there was a pause, and somebody else said, "I suppose there is no news from anywhere yet?"

"No," answered Macnaughten. "Everything's being done that could be done. I'm tired of calls to the telephone, and so, I should think, is Miss Lamotte. There's a perfect network spread for him all round London, but we've seen how sharp he is, and it's my impression that ten minutes' start of us which he got here will take some making up. However——"

At that moment the housekeeper from next door, who since hearing of her employer's delinquencies had done little else than deliver moral lectures upon their turpitude to any audience which she could find, was ushered into the room, clothed in an air of much mystery and reserve and smiling the fatuous smile of those weak people who are suddenly made ambassadors in great matters.

"If you please, Miss Lamotte," said she, bowing and curtsying to the assembled company, and especially to Lord and Lady Maxton, the former of whom screwed his monocle into his right eye and regarded her as if she had been a new and interesting arrival at the Zoo, "if you please, there is a person has just arrived next door who says that she believes she could tell something about Dr. van Mildart. But she refuses," continued the housekeeper, amidst a chorus of excla-

mations, "she refuses to speak unless it is to some very responsible person. So I told her, Miss Lamotte, that you and Mr. Macnaughten were—ahem—detectives, and——"

"Fetch her here at once, please, Mrs. Blashfield," said Miss Lamotte, with a glance at Goulburn. "Bring her straight in."

"Oh—she said a person," said Lady Maxton in a loud whisper. "You don't think she might be—er—somebody sent by Dr. van Mildart to kill us all by throwing bombs at us? Do you think so, Freddie?"

"Can't tell, begad, till we see her, begad!" replied his lordship. "Might be, yah know. Never can tell. Doosed good fun, though."

The object of the Countess of Maxton's fears presently entered the library, proudly escorted by Mrs. Blashfield. She was a quiet-looking little woman, plainly and neatly dressed, and looked somewhat timid and nervous when she found herself in such a large room and amongst so many people. Macnaughten and Miss Lamotte went forward and spoke to her, and Goulburn gave her a chair, while Maisie brought her a cup of tea.

"There's something you wanted to tell us, isn't there?" said Macnaughten. "Don't be afraid—speak out. If you don't want whatever it is you have to say to go any further, it shan't. You think you know something about Dr. van Mildart—isn't that it?"

The woman nodded her head, and then took a sip at her tea.

"Well, sir, perhaps I do, and perhaps I don't," she answered, seeming to gain some confidence. "Anyhow, I shall feel easier in my mind if I find out whether I do or not, and that was why I came to headquarters, as one may term it. I thought that there would be them in or about this Dr. van Mildart's house as would be able to tell me for certain if my suspicions was correct, and in that my husband agreed with me."

"Just so," said Macnaughten. "You were quite right. We'll tell you anything we can."

"Well, sir, it's this way—my name's Mrs. Hampson, and me and my husband, Mr. Hampson, which is a carpenter as works in Pentonville Road, lives in Lloyd Square, and that as no doubt you'll know, sir, is on the other side of King's Cross Road, going Myddelton Square way. And of course, the house being too big for just our two selves,—we've never had any children,—we've always taken in lodgers in such rooms as we didn't want, as most people does in that district."

"Yes, I understand," said Macnaughten.

"And it's maybe eighteen months since," continued Mrs. Hampson, having again sipped at her tea, "that, having a bed-sitting-room to let on my ground floor, I put a card in the window with 'Lodgings for a Single Gentleman' on it; and that day, sure enough, a gentleman calls, as I say, in the very description of this Dr. van Mildart as me and my husband finds described in the paper this afternoon—though of course our gentleman called himself Mr. Robert Sinclair. Well, he knocks

at the door, and I opens it, and he says, 'If you're the landlady, I should like to look at that room you've to let,' and of course I showed him in. It's a very nice room, sir—quiet and well-furnished. 'That'll do for me,' he says, 'except that you can take the bed out, because I shall never use it.' Well, of course, that seemed a bit strange, and I dare say I looked surprised, for he went on: 'I'll tell you exactly what I want,' he says, 'and then you'll understand. I'm a traveller in cheap jewellery,' he says, 'and I've very often a good bit of business in this part of the town, and I want a room that I can use as a sort of office and stockroom. You see? Some days I might be here for two or three hours a day; some days I might never be here at all. I should certainly never sleep here. I'm willing to pay you a pound a week,' he says. 'What do you say?' Well, of course, a pound a week was very handsome, considerin' there was nothing to do for him, and so I spoke to my husband, as happened to be in at the time, and we agreed to let him the room. Well, the next day he had a safe put into the room and a queer new lock on the door, and that was all the alteration he made. After that he began coming. Sometimes he'd be a fortnight and never come near; sometimes he'd come several days running. He never stopped long at any time—usually he'd be there perhaps an hour. This morning it was that he came about half-past eleven, and it was then that I was a bit suspicious about him for the first time."

"Yes—and what aroused your suspicions?" in-

quired Macnaughten, as Mrs. Hampson paused to accept more tea from Moira.

"Well, sir, he was, as I say, the very image of the description of this Dr. van Mildart," replied Mrs. Hampson, holding up a copy of a pink newspaper. "The same sort of beard and moustache, shape and colour and everything, and the same style of dressing—a bit sportish-like. This morning he comes bustling in just as I was going out, and I asked him if there was anything he'd be wanting, for I should be out for an hour. He said no, nothing, and went into his room as if he was in a hurry——"

"Was he carrying anything?" asked Miss Lamotte.

"Yes, miss—a brown bag like that described in this here paper. Well, I went out, and I was away about a quarter of an hour when I remembered that I'd left something that I particularly wanted. So I went back, me being then in the Pentonville Road. Just before turning down one of the side streets into our square I stepped into a shop for a moment,—a confectioner's it was,—and as I was standing waiting my turn I saw the man as we'd known as Mr. Sinclair pass. And you could have knocked me down with a feather at the sight of him—you could indeed!"

"Yes? Why?" asked Macnaughten.

"Because, sir," replied Mrs. Hampson solemnly, "in that quarter of an hour that I'd left him he'd shaved off his beard and moustache and was as clean as a baby what's newly born! But I knew him—I knew him!"

CHAPTER XV

GONE AWAY!

THE silence which followed this dramatic announcement was broken by Lord Maxton, who, having listened to the carpenter's wife's story as children listen to thrilling tales of ghosts and giants—with open-mouthed attention—now remarked—

"Doosed clever, begad! Never ha' thought o' that meself. Um!—clever chap. Take some catching, eh, Dolly?"

"I always admired his beard so much!" said Lady Maxton, with a plaintive sigh. "I wonder if it is the same man."

"Yes, that's what we want to get at," said Macnaughten. "You're sure, Mrs. Hampson, that the man who passed when you were in the confectioner's shop was the man you had known as Sinclair?"

"Yes; certain as I am that Hampson is Hampson, sir!"

"Well, which way did he go?"

"He went away up the hill towards the Angel, sir, walking very quick, and carrying his little bag, just as I'd seen him do many's the time. And I can give you a proof, sir, that'll show you as how I'm not without

powers of observation, as Hampson, as is a bit of a scholar, calls them."

Mrs. Hampson glanced round the circle of faces with the air of one who anticipates the joys of triumph.

"Why, sir, although he'd shaved off his beard and moustache," she said, "which was, of course, very changing to his face, he hadn't been able to shave off his habit of lifting his chin when he looked at anything. This—er—way he had a habit of looking," continued Mrs. Hampson, treating the company to an imitation of van Mildart's curious trick of throwing back his head and tilting nose and chin. "And just as he passed the confectionery shop he looked up the hill towards the Angel, and I knew there was no mistake. And of course," she concluded, with the accent of to-be-sure-ness, "of course there was his blue spectacles, which me nor Hampson never once see him without."

"I was afraid," said Macnaughten aside to Miss Lamotte, "that he'd get rid of those blue spectacles."

"So was I," she answered. "It seems evident that he's forced to wear them. Yes, Mrs. Hampson, what else?"

"Well, miss, of course, after that I went home, feeling queer and upset, for mysteries is what I can't abear. Hampson, he didn't come home to his dinner till very late to-day, 'cause of a special job he's on with, and when he comes, as is his custom, he brings in a paper, which in usual he reads after his dinner when he's having his pipe of tobacco. But to-day he starts on as soon as he gets inside the house. 'There's been a nice to-do down the West End way!' he says, and reads some of

it out, horrible enough to make one go without a good dinner, as was boiled beef and suet dumplings, done to a turn. 'An' who's this description of this here Dr. van Mildart remind you of, Maria Jane?' he says, and reads it careful. 'Mercy upon us, James Henry Hampson!' says I, 'it's Sinclair!' And then, of course, I told him of what had happened that morning. 'Maria Jane,' he says, very solemn, 'that's the man—a-flyin' from Justice.' That's just what he said, did my husband. And so it was settled that I should come here and see where this Dr. van Mildart lived, and find out if there was any responsible person as could tell me anything. And I would like to know, ladies and gentlemen, if you think as this Mildart really was Sinclair; for if he was, me and Hampson would like to have that there room and safe opened; for, as Hampson says, who knows what dead corpses and unpleasant bodies mayn't have been carted in there unbeknownst to either of us?"

Mrs. Hampson's last remark made a strong impression upon the Countess, who had a vivid imagination and a love of any new sensation. She proposed that they should all go straight off and see what they could really find in the room and the safe, and was suddenly seized with the notion that her diamonds might not improbably be there.

But the Earl, in spite of his belief in his wife's cleverness, shook his head with what was for him a very sagacious expression.

"No jolly fear, begad!" said he. "No, Dolly—you're doosed clever, but off the scent there. Nobody's goin'

to leave two-fifty-thou.'s worth of diamonds behind him when he could carry 'em in his pockets. The diamonds are where he is, yah know, eh?"

"His lordship is quite right, Countess," said Macnaughten. "Leave the matter to us—we'll run van Mildart down yet. Now, Mrs. Hampson, we're very much obliged to you, and we've carefully noted all you've told us, and the safe and the room shall be examined as you suggest. Leave your exact address with Miss Lamotte, and we'll see that you're looked after all right."

So Mrs. Hampson gave her correct address and exchanged a few words with Miss Lamotte, and was then handed over to Mrs. Blashfield, who immediately conducted her next door, in order to show her where the wicked doctor had lived and to extract still further particulars from her as to the mysterious lodger who seemed to be identical with him. As for the party left behind, most of them remained to discuss the little woman's news, with the exception of Macnaughten, who hurried away to the telephone, and of the reporters, who, having secured some new and startling copy, flew on the wings of the wind to make the most of it. It was the opinion of everybody that it was impossible for van Mildart to escape—by that time the whole country was aroused, and his description circulated everywhere. There was not a railway station inland nor a port on the coast that would not be watched as closely as a terrier watches for rats at a malt-kiln door. How he could get away through such a cordon of police and public as that

which ringed the island round it seemed impossible to conceive.

"But the beggar's so monstrous clever, begad, yah know," said Lord Maxton, with the air of the wise man who sums up everything. "Wily old fox as ever I knew—slipped into some drain-pipe or other, yah know, somewhere. Take some smart hounds to move him. Eh, what?"

"There are plenty in pursuit, at any rate," said Goulburn. "We must have news of him soon."

But no news came. As in the case of Mrs. Hampson, a good many people were ready enough to come forward with reports. One railway porter was absolutely certain that he saw Dr. van Mildart with the now famous brown bag at Paddington, on the principal departure platform, at exactly ten minutes past eleven on the fateful morning; another was equally positive that at the very same moment he saw the fugitive at Fenchurch Street. A waterman came forward to say that about noon that day he had conveyed a man answering the published description of van Mildart from some steps near Wapping to a trading vessel lying in the Upper Pool—he had not heard of the Prince's Gate affair at the time, having been on the river all the morning, and the vessel had sailed soon after his passenger had boarded her. In his case, he remembered the vessel's name and her port of destination. Inquiries proved that the passenger's only resemblance to van Mildart was that he was bearded and wore spectacles. And so these false alarms and reports

went on. He had been captured at Southampton. The Liverpool police—specially active in view of his probable escape to America—had effected his arrest as he boarded the *Lusitania*. The French police had got him—no, the German police—no, the Belgian. He was heard of in Spain, again in Germany. Then it was confidently asserted that he had escaped to the Argentine Republic's territory, where so many of his sort were glad to hasten.

The Hampson incident turned out a lamentable fiasco with a humorous side to it. On the day following Mrs. Hampson's report, Macnaughten himself, with some other officers, and accompanied by Miss Lamotte, went to the house in Lloyd Square for the purpose of examining the mysterious lodger's room and belongings. The Hampson establishment was by that time, of course, quite famous. There were pictures of it in at least three morning newspapers, together with a species of autobiographical notices of the Hampsons, thus suddenly lifted into fame, from which it appeared (as matters of tremendous interest) that Hampson's father, like himself, had been a carpenter at the same shop where Hampson worked, and that it was not true (as had been maliciously stated by a near neighbour) that Mrs. Hampson did clear starching. Crowds were round the house when the detectives and their posse got there. They stared open-mouthed at Miss Lamotte, whose portraits had been in nearly every London paper that morning. Miss Lamotte, waiting until the door was opened, had to hear criticisms upon herself.

"That's 'er wot tracked 'im dahn, see?"

"Bin a-trackin' of 'im for two years, wot?"

"Looks like a real lydy, don't she?"

"Strynge wot some o' these here lydies will turn to nah-a-dyes! Wot wiv these 'ere suffragettes as they call 'em, and lydy 'tecs and lydy 'spectors o' this, that, and t'other, blowed if I know wot we're a-comin' to!"

Hampson, in honour of the occasion, had got or had taken a morning off, and he and Mrs. Hampson were quite prepared to do the honours. Hampson, as a fully qualified journeyman carpenter of experience, took much pride in pointing out that the locks which secured the door of the room occupied in such a mysterious fashion by the supposed van Mildart, alias Sinclair, were of an almost impregnable nature. Oh, they'd got to be forced, had they? Well, he and his missus were not the sort to defeat the hands of Justice. But of course they were poor, 'ard-workin' folk, and no doubt the Gover'ment wouldn't be against Compensation—a trifle to put on a new lock and to pay for such paint and varnish as was wanted. Justice, he remarked (with eloquence, as he had visited the public-house round the corner more than once that morning), was a Sacred Thing. Let the officers proceed.

So the myrmidons of the Sacred Thing broke open the door of the mysterious room, and discovered (to use a very appropriate stage expression) a somewhat dingily furnished apartment, in which the principal object was certainly a safe—obviously purchased second, or more likely third, hand at one of those

dismal establishments where all the old furniture that ever was gathers itself together. The great men of our police are never at a loss for anything, and as they had an itching and irritating curiosity to know what was really inside that safe, they had caused to be present one of the most redoubtable cracksmen of his day, who happened to be having a holiday from either Dartmoor or Portland just then, and whom they proposed to employ in a legitimate fashion on this occasion only. It was while this gentleman was expressing his open contempt of the safe, and declaring his intention of being free of its contents in two minutes, that a man who certainly wore sporting-looking clothes and blue spectacles, and bore traces of having recently been relieved of a light-coloured beard and moustache, entered the house amidst great commotion from the crowd outside, and, forcing his way into the room, pointedly and forcibly asked what the devil they all meant by breaking in upon his privacy and attempting to damage his property. And at sight of him Mrs. Hampson screamed, and Macnaughten and Miss Lamotte, recognising the situation, said things under their breath.

“What’s it mean, you, Mrs. Hampson—and you, Hampson?” demanded this infuriated person. “How dare you allow these people to break into my room? Haven’t I always paid you regular?—have I ever given you any trouble? What’s it all mean, I say?”

Mrs. Hampson sobbed.

“Oh, Mr. Sinclair!” she exclaimed, “oh, Mr. Sin-

clair! What a world o' worrittin' you might ha' saved me an' these here kind ladies and gentlemen if you'd ha' had less o' mystery in your nature, sir! Oh dear, dear, dear!"

Mr. Sinclair looked wonderingly around the semi-circle of faces.

"What's the old fool mean?" he asked. "Is—is she drunk?"

Mr. Hampson stepped forward.

"Misher Shinclair," he remarked, waving an admonitory forefinger, "Misher Shincl-air, f'you wish t'address m'wife, sir, you'll please address that estim'ble lady ash a lady. You'll 'low me, Misher——"

Mrs. Hampson began to wail.

"It's all your own fault, Mr. Sinclair! Why did you go for to shave off your beard and 'stashers yesterday?"

Then Mr. Sinclair looked as one looks who is on the verge of lunacy. He glared at everybody.

"Shave off my beard and moustache, you old idiot? Why, because it's such hot weather, and I wanted to feel cool. And now I'll thank somebody to tell me what all this means, and then I'll have the law on every man Jack in this room—yes, and woman too!"

So there was an end of that clue. Subsequently Mr. and Mrs. Hampson had words. And nobody was a penny the better for Mrs. Hampson's visit to Harley Street, nor for the descent upon Lloyd Square.

At the end of a week nobody had heard a word about Dr. van Mildart. At the end of a fortnight there were

not wanting certain sceptical people in various parts of the country who were bold enough to express doubts in public as to whether such a person ever really existed. And about the same time the Earl of Maxton declared, in his best stableboy fashion, that he would not kick his heels in London to please all the police that ever were, and that he was going yachting, a sudden desire for the sea having seized upon him. Whereupon he sent instructions to Gravesend, where his magnificent steam-yacht, the *Lorelei*, then lay, to have everything in readiness within a week, and at the same time bade his wife ask whatever company she pleased to go with them for a four weeks' cruise towards the Arctic regions—that, in the Earl's opinion, being the most fitting direction to take considering the extremely hot time which he had lately had.

Now, the Countess of Maxton, as has already been remarked, was an eccentric young lady, who loved nothing so much as something new. She was just then wanting new sensations. She was bored to death, she said, by all the people she knew—she wanted new society. She had been much interested in the young people she had met in Harley Street, and in Miss Lamotte and Mr. Macnaughten, and she suddenly decided that she would have them all on the *Lorelei* and nobody else. She knew about the marriage already arranged between Richard and Moira, and the special licence—what more delightful than to persuade Christopher and Maisie to follow their example, have the two couples quietly united, and take them away for their

honeymoon? She went at once and told the Earl of her brilliant idea. The Earl made no objection, but rather rejoiced. Goulburn, he said, was a sensible chap, with no nonsense about him, and Christopher was nearly as amusing as the late Dan Leno. Miss Lamotte was a doosed smart woman. Macnaughten was a one-er and no mistake, even if he hadn't caught van Mildart yet; and the girls were very nice, with no airs. Ask the lot, by all means—much better fun than the last cargo they carted round.

So the Countess went energetically to work, cajoling and persuading everybody; and she got round Mr. Pepperall, and made him persuade Christopher to be sensible; and a dual marriage duly took place—very quietly; and Mr. Macnaughten found that a holiday would do him good, and Miss Lamotte made no objection, and the Countess was delighted, and the Earl good-humouredly pleased because he was in no danger of being bored. His last yachting party had consisted of the Very Great—and there had been a Dean in it. So one August day the *Lorelei* sailed out past the Nore, and turned northward on a voyage which was to prove more eventful than any on board her reckoned for.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SPARROW-HAWK

THAT good old English saying that you have got to live with people before you really know them was never better exemplified than in the case of the people thrown together on the *Lorelei*. To the two newly married couples, to Miss Lamotte, and to Mac-naughten, their host and hostess had hitherto presented themselves in somewhat different guises to those which clothed them at closer quarters. The Earl had just the same stableboyish manners and speech, the Countess was just as frivolous and as babyish as on all previous occasions, but each, viewed from nearer stand-points, proved to have certain qualities which none of their guests had suspected them of possessing. They were admirable as host and hostess; they were unaffectedly pleased with their companions; they were both childishly simple in their ideas and tastes. One of Christopher's jokes would plunge the Earl into a seventh heaven of delight; the mere notion that she had two honeymooning couples under her wing gave the Countess an ample fund of pleasure. Everybody got on very well with everybody else, and the Earl grew loquacious and began to tell stories of his hunting and shooting. He had a limited vocabulary and very little

choice of expression, but he had been everywhere and done and seen most things, and, once properly drawn out and listened to with sympathy, could tell of adventures with big game and of hairbreadth escapes in jungle and forest that were well worth listening to. He began to enjoy his evenings. The *Lorelei* was a magnificently equipped vessel, furnished with every luxury and carrying the Earl's famous chef, who knew better than he knew anything else how to please his master. And so there was the most excellent food and the finest wines every night, and under the sheltering deck afterwards there was music, and now and then dancing, and Christopher's witticisms, and Macnaughten's anecdotes of his adventurous life, and the Earl's stories of grizzly bears, hippopotami, and famous runs with the Pythley—and everybody went to bed in the greatest of good humours, especially the host, who at the end of a fortnight told his Countess that, begad, this was the nicest lot o' people they'd ever had on board, and that he'd be damned if he'd ever have any Deans or Dukes or Dowagers again—not his line, begad!

As for Mr. Christopher Aspinall, now a married man, he began to develop qualms of conscience. And one day, lying in luxurious ease on soft cushions in a sheltered part of the after deck, the blue waters of a Norwegian fjord lapping idly against the sides of the motionless *Lorelei*, he addressed his bride, who sat at his side, pretending to be busily engaged with her fancy-work.

"Mrs. Aspinall—Mrs. Christopher Aspinall!"

"Well, Mr. Aspinall?"

"Has it ever struck you—that is, of late—that you and I are rank impostors?"

"I can't say that it has."

"Well, we are—impostors of the deepest dye. Or else we are Something Else—Something Else in capitals, you understand."

"I don't understand a bit. Why are we Impostors or Something Else—in capitals?"

"Ah! However, I will explain. Am not I a tea merchant of London town?"

"I believe so. Yes, of course you are—junior partner in Pepperall, Tardrew, & Aspinall."

"Of a certainty. Are not you, then, a tea merchant's wife?"

"I am—also of London town."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Christopher Aspinall, there you're wrong. You are only of London town because of reflected glory through me—Me. None of the misguided people who are foolish enough to be born in those strange parts called the Provinces can ever be said to be of London town. I am a real Londoner. I was literally born within sound of Bow Bells—in Aldersgate, to be accurate. Now, you were born——"

"Very well. Why are we impostors—or something else?"

Christopher's voice assumed its most tragic tones.

"Because we are. Do eagles keep company with sparrows?"

"I should pity the sparrows if they did."

"Well, perhaps. But we are soaring in high spheres. We are the guests of a belted earl. I've never seen the belt yet, and I doubt if Maxton knows where his has got to, if he ever had it—which I doubt still more. Now, why should we be the guests of the mighty?"

"Because we were invited to be. And it's awfully nice, Chris dear!"

"Sweetest of little women, it is indeed awfully nice! To be vulgar, it is real jam. It is equal to our very best at five and eleven per pound. But—I am a tea merchant. I cannot afford to live like a Hearl. When we live in our little humble home, where the once frolicsome kipper will make its appearance much more constantly than the lordly salmon, we shall——"

"Yes, we shall. We shall think of what a good time we had, and how kind our host and hostess——"

"Never remind me of my duties, Mrs. Christopher Aspinall. I trust that my feelings are what they should be. To be vulgar again, I have done myself a fair treat, and never had the bloomin' 'ump once—not even when left alone with you, as on this occasion."

"But you are threatening to have it. What do you want? Here you are with everything that man can desire—the most attentive and generous hosts, a yacht fit for the King, magnificent scenery, splendid weather, most beautiful cooking, and a charming wife! Can any reasonable man want more?"

Christopher lighted another cigar and smoked thoughtfully for a time.

"As I have previously remarked," he said at last,

"I am a tea merchant of London town. My usual avocation is, in short, to sell tea—not in pennorths, nor even in pounds, but in Quantities. It is a peaceful avocation, necessitating little more savagery than is usually associated with the careers of those who are in—shall we say, in silk. Accordingly, when I come to sea with a Belted Earl I want Adventure, Romance, Blood! Here we are in the land of the Vikings. I haven't seen a Viking so far, neither have you. There have been no adventures, and the days of romance seem to have departed."

"And as for blood, I'm sure I want nothing of that sort," said Maisie. "You ought to be thankful for such peaceful days—it's like heaven!"

"All the same," said Christopher, "a leetle adventure, now—something to do with pirates, or buccaneers, or such—an interview with Captain Kidd or Paul Jones—wouldn't it lend a spice to the banquet?"

But Mrs. Aspinall, having everything that she wanted, protested that she was perfectly happy, and that her husband, after his wont, only talked for the sake of talking.

"And if Paul Jones or Captain Kidd suddenly appeared, you would go and hide in the cellar—if there is such a place in a ship," she added.

Something of the nature of a Captain Kidd or a Paul Jones was much closer at hand than Mr. Christopher Aspinall fancied.

They were lying off Trondhjem one morning some days later, when there came into the roadstead of that

picturesque Norse city a craft which at first sight looked to be something like one of our own torpedo-destroyers—a long, raking, grey-hued thing which promised a race turn of speed. Seen at closer quarters, it proved to be a private steam-yacht, evidently designed for exceptional speed; and later in the day, some of the *Lorelei's* crew, returning from a short visit, brought back word that it was the *Sparrow-Hawk*, owned by Mr. Clifford Vanderkiste of San Francisco.

"That's a young 'Friscan millionaire," said Mac-naughten, when this news arrived. "I've heard of him—they say he's having a high old time with old man Vanderkiste's dollars. Curious notion to paint his yacht that colour—just like a British battleship—dull grey."

The Earl agreed, and remarked, after much silent inspection of the *Sparrow-Hawk*, which had anchored within a mile, that they ought to have called her the *Greyhound*. He further gave it as his opinion that she could do a good twenty-seven knots an hour, which was just about seven knots more than the *Lorelei* could do.

"Don't know much about these things," he continued, in his usual modest fashion, "but that's the sort of craft you'd expect to find armed. Makes you think of guns and that sort of thing—torpedoes, you know, and mines, and so on, begad! Rum notion!"

That night the *Lorelei* and the *Sparrow-Hawk* lay side by side in the roadstead. There was a good deal of fun going on on board the former—the Countess was inclined for an evening's frivolity, and had pressed every member of her small party into "doing some-

thing." She had also made investigations into the powers of the *Lorelei's* crew, and had discovered that one man was what his mates called a "champion clog-dancer," that a second was a most wonderful whistler, and that a third would have earned a very respectable living on the halls as a juggler. Lit up from stem to stern, the *Lorelei* presented a very gay appearance. The curiously dull-coloured craft swinging at her anchor across the dark waters showed nothing but her ordinary lights, and was as quiet as a tombstone in a village churchyard.

In the very midst of these festivities there was a splashing of oars in the neighbourhood of the *Lorelei*, and presently a boat came alongside, and a note was brought up from it to the Earl. It was a very polite note, and written in a bold hand on very distinguished-looking note-paper. Mr. Clifford Vanderkiste presented his compliments to the Earl and Countess of Maxton, of whose presence in his neighbourhood he had learnt that afternoon. He would be infinitely obliged to them if they would allow him to come over, and the only friend he had brought with him, and share in their merry-making, for they were feeling somewhat dull, and the sounds of rejoicing from the *Lorelei* made them feel that they too would like to rejoice. He was sure that the Earl and Countess would forgive him and so on, and so on.

The Earl and Countess at that moment would have forgiven a Red Indian who wanted to execute a war-dance in their drawing-room. They dispatched a hastily

worded but very cordial invitation, and within half an hour were warmly welcoming Mr. Clifford Vanderkiste and his friend, whom he introduced as Mr. Halston Kelsey. Both were typical specimens of young America—big, well-built, strong-boned fellows, with clean-shaven, clear-cut faces, square jaws, and steady eyes, and each was immaculately attired. And Mr. Kelsey, as if to show that he intended to add to the gaiety of whatever was going on, carried a banjo. These two young gentlemen made themselves very quickly at home. Mr. Vanderkiste proved to be exceptionally clever in telling humorous stories; Mr. Kelsey excelled in singing coon songs to his own accompaniment. The Earl declared that they were good chaps, with no bloomin' side on 'em, and the Countess was delighted at the acquisition to her party. When the hilarities came to an end, and they all sat down to a jolly little supper, more was learnt of the visitors. They had come, just the two of them, right across from New York to Alexandria, and had been trifling about the Mediterranean during the early spring; had left the yacht at Genoa, and made an exhaustive trip in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; joined the yacht again, and come round by way of Gibraltar to Cowes Regatta; and from there had made their way north. Now they were going as far into the Arctic regions as they dare, and then by Iceland and Spitzbergen back home. And they declared, when questioned by the inquisitive Countess, that they had never got sick of each other's company, and had never been dull until that night—adding, with great gallantry, that

they would not have felt dull then if there had not been such irresistible attractions within such easy reach.

The Earl, as a yachtsman, wanted to know about the yacht. What made 'em paint it that dust-and-ashes colour? Mr. Vanderkiste said it was most serviceable for the hard work which the *Sparrow-Hawk* would have to do, and gave many learned reasons. Then the Earl wanted to know all about her—her tonnage, her speed. Whereupon Mr. Vanderkiste said that nothing would give him and his friend Mr. Kelsey such an infinitude of pleasure as to show his new friends over the *Sparrow-Hawk*, and he invited the whole party to breakfast on board her at ten o'clock that morning, which invitation was readily accepted. And it being already two o'clock, the proceedings broke up, Mr. Vanderkiste and Mr. Kelsey departing to an accompaniment of cheers, and the Countess declaring that it was one of the best evenings she had ever given.

Now, when he woke some six and a half hours later, Mr. Christopher Aspinall discovered that he had what vulgar people call "a head." He had a constitutional tendency to biliousness, and was easily upset by excitement, late hours, too many cigars, and too much champagne; and he realised upon this occasion, that instead of feasting with the 'Friscan millionaire at ten o'clock, he was much more likely to be occupied in bemoaning his lot and wondering whether strong tea or soda-water would do him most good. Anyway, he flatly refused to go across to the *Sparrow-Hawk*.

"It's no good, Maisie," he groaned. "If I got into a

boat and saw the waves making faces at me, I should be very poorly. I should indeed! You go along with the rest, and leave me in my misery."

"As if I should leave my husband when he's ill—especially when we've only been married three weeks!" exclaimed Maisie. "What do you take me for, Christopher?"

"For an angel, my own. But you'd far better go, because you can't do any good; and when a chap's as bad as I am, he wants to be on his lonesome—he doesn't want to see anybody—no, not even his favourite grandmother!" groaned Christopher. "Go, Maisie—go and enjoy yourself while I die in peace—or in pieces."

"I wish you wouldn't talk nonsense, and I shan't go," said Maisie. "How could I enjoy myself while you are groaning and moaning like that? I shall go and tell Lady Maxton that we are not going."

"Say that if I live till a little later I'll come over," moaned Christopher. "But at present I'm doubtful about anything except that I'm very, very ill. And I don't think I will have any tea—tea does not suit my liver."

Lord Maxton came and looked at Christopher, and having the digestion of an ostrich and the head of a brass statue, laughed joyously.

"Got a head on, old chap?" he said. "Have a half-pint of the Boy. Or let Saunders mix you a pick-me-up—knows a rare trick or two with Worcester sauce and raw eggs, does Saunders, begad! Do him all the good in the world, I assure you, Mrs. Aspinall. Buck up, old

chap—see you later. Sorry you ain't comin', Mrs. Aspinall. Try Saunders—experienced hand, Saunders."

So the rest of the party, with much condolence for Christopher and regrets that Maisie's wifely sense of duty prevented her from accompanying them, set off for the *Sparrow-Hawk*, while the sick man, disdaining the tea and toast which his bride pressed upon him, took his host's advice and sent for Saunders, who diagnosed the case in a second.

"If you will go to breakfast, ma'am," he said, "I'll have Mr. Aspinall all right very soon. You'll feel as fit as a fiddle, sir, in an hour."

"Well, let me know when you're better, Chris," said Maisie, and went off to breakfast alone on deck. She was glad, she said to herself, that she had not gone with the others—it was very pleasant, after the noise and racket of last night's festivities, to sit there and breakfast quietly with the waves lapping lazily against the sides of the yacht and the sunlight flooding earth and sky and sea. The moments went by in calm content.

A sharp crack, as of a rifle, aroused her. She glanced up in the direction of the *Sparrow-Hawk*. So, too, did one of the yacht's crew standing near. What they saw sent Maisie flying down the companion to Christopher, to whom Saunders had just administered comfort. She burst in—panting.

"Chris! Saunders! Come—quick! There's something wrong on the *Sparrow-Hawk*!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE FOX SHOWS HIS TEETH

CHRISTOPHER, tumbling head over heels up-stairs, followed by the usually placid but now much-concerned Saunders, behind whom, already sobbing with fear, came Maisie, found almost every man of the *Lorelei's* crew, from the skipper downwards, staring across the roadstead as if they saw something which had caused them to take momentary leave of their senses. Shading his eyes from the powerful glare of the sun, he too looked across the dancing waves—and could scarcely believe the evidence of those eyes.

The *Sparrow-Hawk* was swinging round to the open sea; it was evident that her engineers had full steam up, and that, with her enormous turn of speed, she would very quickly be out of sight. But that was not all; it was, rather, a small detail. There was a tragedy going on. From the side nearest to the *Lorelei* puffs of smoke, slight and white, issued, coming from the deck—the puffs that follow rifle or revolver shots. And all the time the sinister grey hull was swinging rapidly round.

A sharp cry from one of the crew at his elbow brought Christopher to a keen sense of the situation.

“There!—swimming!”

Then they saw that something—man, woman, something human—was swimming with strong, sturdy strokes in their direction. They saw, too, that the shots were directed at it.

An arm—white in the brilliant sunlight, white against the green-blue of the dancing waters—shot up, a signal for help.

The crew of the *Lorelei* burst into activity. The boat which had carried the breakfast party across, and had only just returned, was dancing idly beneath them; in a moment it was filled and being pulled at a feverish rate in the direction of the swimmer. The swimmer was still coming along, but at a slower speed—slower at every stroke.

Maisie clasped her husband's arm.

"Chris!" she whispered, "who is it?"

"Heaven knows!" answered Christopher. "There's something wrong, Maisie—horribly wrong. See! She's off!"

The *Sparrow-Hawk* had swung round by that time, and as a racehorse goes when the starting-gate is lifted, she went clean away for the open sea, seeming to break into her top speed at once. The *Lorelei's* skipper, with something between a curse and a groan, gave some orders to his officers; there was bustle and commotion everywhere on the instant.

"They're off indeed, sir!" exclaimed Saunders. "Good God!—and we haven't got steam up. His lordship told me this morning he meant to stay here until day after to-morrow."

The boat was approaching the swimmer, who, it was easy to see, was in difficulties. Now it was within two hundred, now one hundred, now fifty yards. Suddenly two arms went up, then disappeared. Maisie clutched Christopher's elbow on one side, Saunders' on the other.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am," said Saunders. "They've got him. And it's Mr. Macnaughten. I think he's wounded."

By the time the boat came alongside every man on board the *Lorelei* was working with feverish activity to get steam up. There was no necessity to wait for Macnaughten's account of what had happened—it was plain that treachery of some sort had taken place, and that the queer-looking yacht, so called, must be followed. Nevertheless, as the boat approached the gangway, all who could crowded to it, Christopher foremost. He shouted one word to Macnaughten while they were twenty yards apart—

"Well?"

And Macnaughten, pale, and bleeding from a wound in the shoulder, shouted two words back—

"Van Mildart!"

Christopher vented his feelings in a sharp whistle. He turned to his wife and Saunders.

"Quick!" he said. "Do you see how he's bleeding?—and we've no doctor on board! We must do what we can. Hurry, and get things ready for him. Lucky I know a bit about first aid."

While Maisie and the valet hastened downstairs to make arrangements for the wounded man's reception,

the boat came alongside, and in another moment Christopher was helping Macnaughten on deck. The detective was very pale and obviously in great pain, and his right arm hung limp and useless. He had somehow got rid of his jacket, and his shirt was already soaked with blood. Although he was biting his lips with pain, he tried to make light of his injuries.

"It's only a flesh wound," he said. "It went right through the fleshy part of the arm just beneath the shoulder. It'll be all right, Aspinall—never mind me now. Where's the captain? Tell him to get steam up and go all he knows after that cursed ship. I tell you van Mildart is on board, and there'll be Heaven knows what—black, cowardly murder at least!"

"They're getting steam up now," answered Christopher. "Come below, Macnaughten, and let me see that wound—I can do a bit of first aid of a sort."

"Oh, so can I," said Macnaughten, still affecting indifference. "Plenty of cold water, some lint, and some bandages—that's what we want. I've had worse wounds than this, and my flesh heals quickly. I'm a bit done with the shock and the swim, but I'll be all right."

However, he was very glad of a stiff dose of brandy when he got into his cabin, and thankful, too, when Christopher and Saunders had put dry clothes on him and dressed the wound under his superintendence, to lie down and rest.

"Run up and see where that rascally pirate has got to, Aspinall," he said anxiously. "And do get the skipper to hurry up."

And Christopher ran on deck, and shading his eyes with a hand still stained with Macnaughten's blood, looked out across the glittering waters. The *Sparrow-Hawk* was already hull down on the westward horizon.

The captain went down with Christopher to the wounded man's cabin, where Maisie was busied in arranging cushions and pillows for his comfort and Saunders was tidying up. Macnaughten asked impatiently for news.

"We'll have steam up presently and get away at our best lick, Mr. Macnaughten," replied the captain; "but yon's a much faster sailer than the *Lorelei*, and once she's out of our sight, I misdoubt that we'll never be seeing her again. I was noticing her lines generally last night as I passed her—she's a good five knots faster than what we are, sir."

Macnaughten uttered an impatient exclamation.

"I know that, worse luck!" he said. "I didn't board her for nothing. She's as fast as a destroyer. And there's not much of a pleasure yacht about her, my faith! She's armoured—and armed too. And as for Vanderkiste—or rather, for that young devil who came here posing as Vanderkiste—why, he's just one of the gang headed by van Mildart. There'll be murder, that's what there'll be. You saw how they tried to shoot me like a dog!—if there was one shot there were twenty."

"If it won't weaken you too much," said Christopher, "tell us what you found there."

"Oh, I'm all right," replied Macnaughten. "I'll ask Saunders for a little brandy if I feel faint. What did

we find on the *Sparrow-Hawk*? Well, we ought to have found her flying the skull and cross-bones—so we ought. I began to feel uneasy as soon as we were on deck—you know that sort of premonitory feeling that there's something wrong. I don't know what it was. Our reception was all right. There were the so-called Vanderkiste and Kelsey at the top of the gangway to receive us—confounded scoundrels!—with outstretched hands and smiles of welcome. One of them—Vanderkiste, I think—suggested that we might like to have a look around the upper deck before going into the cabin for breakfast, so we just wandered about a little. I was noticing the general cut of the crew; they are all handsomely uniformed and very smart, but if nine-tenths of them haven't a pretty good acquaintance with bowie-knives and six-shooters, then I know nothing. There are a good many niggers among them—the sort that one doesn't care about having overmuch to do with—and a few Portuguese, picked up, I reckon, in some South American port. A shifty-eyed, truculent-looking lot, taking 'em altogether, I can assure you!"

He paused to take a sip at the brandy and soda which Saunders had placed within reach of his sound arm, and Christopher begged him to take his time and not to tax his strength.

"Oh, I'm pretty tough!" he said, continuing. "Well, it didn't need half an eye to see that that ship wasn't just meant for pleasure. She was like a sharp terrier dog that only just wants a hint to show its bristles and its teeth. Yacht!—it's a little battleship—and an ugly

and wicked one at that. I soon saw she was not only armoured for some feet both above and below the water-line, but that she carried some very business-like-looking guns. 'You might be thinking of having a snap with somebody,' I said to Vanderkiste as we strolled around. He gave me a sly look. 'Don't know that we shan't have yet,' he says. 'We're going into some strange quarters before we're through with this little trip, and it's just as well to be careful.' 'Even if one is on a pleasure yacht,' says I meaningly. 'Just so,' says he. 'And of course,' I said, eyeing one of the quick-firing guns, 'of course, if you must arm yourself, it's best to have the very latest invention.' 'I quite agree with you,' he says."

The engines of the *Lorelei* began to hum, to throb, to settle down into a steady singing.

"Now we're after her," said the captain. He ran on deck, and came back a minute or two later, obviously anxious to hear the rest of Macnaughten's story. "I can just see the *Sparrow-Hawk*," he said. "She's got a big start on us, though."

"Oh, we'll never catch her; and if we did, she could blow us out of the water!" groaned Macnaughten. "All we can do is to hope to trace her. It's my opinion she's off for South America—Buenos Ayres, very likely. Well, as I was telling you, we looked about us for a while, and then Vanderkiste led the way to breakfast. He was walking with Lady Maxton and Mrs. Goulburn; Goulburn and Lord Maxton were talking to Kelsey; Miss Lamotte and myself were farther in the

rear as we went down to the saloon. She gave me a queer look and spoke in an undertone: 'This is a strange sort of yacht,' she said. 'It seems to me there are more cannon than couches, and I don't like the look of anything.' 'Neither do I,' I replied in a whisper. 'Keep your weather eye open.'

"Well, they ushered us into a very comfortable saloon; it certainly wasn't elegantly furnished or appointed—nothing like his lordship's here, for instance—but it was comfortable enough for a ship of that sort. There was a biggish table in the centre, spread for breakfast; and I must say that the breakfast was a very good one and beautifully served, and I dare say beautifully cooked, only I really can't say as to that, because I never got a bite of it, of course. There were piles of the most tempting-looking fruit here and there, and fresh flowers, and enough champagne in view to float a small lugger—metaphorically speaking. I wasn't sorry to see that breakfast—the row across the bay had made me hungry, and I saw some cold pickled trout, of which I am very fond. However, I very soon forgot all about breakfast, I can assure you!

"There were two niggers in the room in white drill uniforms, ready to wait on us, and everything seemed to be in readiness. Vanderkiste begged us to be seated, and took Lady Maxton to the top of the table. Mrs. Goulburn faced her on the other side; Goulburn sat by Lady Maxton, and Lord Maxton by Mrs. Goulburn, with Miss Lamotte next to him. Vanderkiste, standing at the head of the table, pointed me to a place next to

Miss Lamotte's. Kelsey was at the foot. We were all seated except Vanderkiste, who stood in the principal place, watching us. He gave us a peculiar smile. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'I must ask your pardon for a little imposition. All things are fair, you know, in love and war. Allow me to vacate this place, and to introduce you to your host—and your captor!'

"As he said that, the young villain threw open a door behind him, and stood aside with a mocking smile. There, watching us with those malignant eyes of his, stood van Mildart!

"Well, you can guess what we felt. The little Countess screamed; poor Mrs. Goulburn went white as a sheet; even Miss Lamotte blenched before the little devil's fierce gaze. As for Lord Maxton, Goulburn, and myself, we all jumped to our feet. And when we did that, those cursed niggers just stepped quietly to the entrance and drew a couple of as ugly-looking guns as ever I saw. It was a clean hold-up, you can be sure.

"Now, I never admired Lord Maxton as much since I came to know him as I did just then. His lordship is as kind a man and as hospitable an entertainer as you could find, but he isn't exactly what you'd call a giant in intellect, and sometimes he talks rather like a school-boy or one of his stablemen. Well, now he stood up and faced van Mildart and spoke straight. 'What do you mean by this, sir?' he demanded, in a very stern voice. 'Why are we subjected to this outrage?' He made a good figure, standing there, I can tell you, and I admired him.

"But van Mildart!—that man has a face of brass and a heart of stone. He motioned us to sit down. Needless to say we didn't.

" 'There is no need to waste words,' said he. 'You are all in my power, and nothing can save you. To save time, I may as well tell you at once what is in store for you. You, Lord and Lady Maxton, must pay a ransom of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds; you, Mr. and Mrs. Goulburn, a like sum. If you refuse, we will take means to make you comply with our demands. As for the two others, they are poor people, but we have scores to reckon with both. You, Lamotte, as a traitor, shall be taken to a certain island I know of where everything is covered by land-crabs, and there you shall be left. There is no food to be had, and no water; there is no shade, but there is a lot of sun. You will starve; you will thirst; the crabs will watch you, and you will watch the crabs; the crabs will never grow tireless, but you will want to sleep, and will not dare to sleep. You will go mad—and then the crabs will eat you.'

"Well, I'll give Miss Lamotte credit for this—she never flinched a scrap as the little beast let all this off. She just looked at him with contempt, pure and simple, and she smiled a little. But van Mildart took no further notice of her; he turned to me.

" 'As for you, Macnaughten,' he says, 'you've more than once put spokes in wheels of mine, and you've been directly responsible for the deaths of two of my principal co-adjutors in times past. By all the rules of war your life is forfeit. You will be shot—at once.

There's no particular reason why you should live any longer. See that that is carried out instantly,' he wound up, turning to the fellow who posed as Vanderkiste. 'As for the rest of them, let them breakfast with what appetites they have.' And with that he went inside his den again, and the door closed on him.

"Well, you may just guess that wasn't nice. The Vanderkiste man drew his gun and motioned me up-stairs, and Kelsey and the niggers were equally insistent. The women shrieked; Lord Maxton swore; Goulburn expostulated. In another minute I was on deck, with these four devils round me and Vanderkiste yelling some orders in a lingo I didn't understand. Nice—wasn't it?

"It was then I made my dash. I drove one fist into Vanderkiste's face, the other into Kelsey's, tripped one nigger up with one foot, the other with the other, and went over the side like a streak of specially greased lightning. I'm a good swimmer, and I kept down as long as I could and swam as far as I could, getting my jacket off as I swam. But one bullet got me when I came up. What happened after that you all know."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BLESSINGS OF SCIENCE

WHILE Macnaughten was narrating the story of his brief but somewhat too exciting stay on the *Sparrow-Hawk*, that piratical craft was speeding away to the open sea at a good two-and-twenty knots an hour. Over a surface as smooth as that of an island lake untroubled even by the gentlest mountain breezes she flew, a long trailing column of smoke marking her progress in the sky, a widening track of white foam showing it in the sea. Folk who saw her start off from the quay-sides of Trondhjem remarked on her turn of speed—she should, said they, have been called the *Swallow*.

Van Mildart's five prisoners, left to themselves in the saloon, with their captor's mocking invitation to eat breakfast with such appetites as they could muster still fresh in their memories, were anything but cheerful. The Countess and Moira had been terribly frightened at hearing Macnaughten sentenced to summary execution, and the first shots on deck sent the former into hysterics and then into a swoon. Lord Maxton and Goulburn, however, quickly recognised the true meaning of the score or so of shots which rang out in rapid succession; rushing to the port-holes of the saloon they

were able to announce that Macnaughten had effected his escape, and was swimming strongly towards the *Lorelei*; then that they were afraid he had been hit; then that a boat had put off to meet him; finally, that he had got on board again.

"He and Aspinall will do something between them!" exclaimed Lord Maxton. "Neither of 'em fools, begad—no, indeed. Both got brains, yah know. Now's the time to exercise 'em. I've great faith in Aspinall—smart fellow."

"The worst of it is," said Miss Lamotte, who also had been making observations through a port-hole, and had noticed that the *Sparrow-Hawk* was slipping through the water at a great rate, "the worst of it is that this vessel seems to be very fast,—much faster, I think, Lord Maxton, than the *Lorelei*,—and I'm afraid van Mildart will soon carry us out of sight."

"Well, but he can't go on for ever, yah know, Miss Lamotte," replied the Earl. "Bound to put in somewhere, some time, for grub and provisions, eh?—and water and coal. I say, I'm mons'ous hungry. Prisoners or no prisoners, I think we ought to eat. Dolly, if you're out of that faint, try to pick something. Here, I'll give you a tumbler of the Boy—do you heaps of good. No use being miserable, eh? Mrs. Goulburn, sit down and breakfast."

With that Lord Maxton very deftly opened a large bottle of champagne, in a fashion which showed much experience, and gave everybody a glassful with a dexterity and celerity that would have made a young

butler's fortune. Then he fell to on the viands, and proved himself as good a trencherman as if he had been in his own dining-room at Maxton after a big day with his horse or his gun.

The two niggers who had escorted Macnaughten to a sudden death reëntered the saloon, transformed from bloodthirsty ruffians to decorous and civil attendants. They evinced no surprise at finding Lord Maxton breakfasting heartily and the rest making some pretence at eating and drinking, and they performed their duties quietly and respectfully. When everybody had finished (which really means when Lord Maxton had quite finished) they cleared the table and rearranged the saloon. The man who called himself Vanderkiste came in just after they had retired. He was evidently in anything but a good temper, and his face (a handsome if somewhat sinister one) bore the marks of the blow which Macnaughten had dealt him.

"Dr. van Mildart begs that you will make yourself as comfortable as the circumstances permit," he said stiffly. "Of course, as prisoners of war, you cannot expect anything so grand and luxurious as the floating palace from which we have removed you; but you may regard this saloon as private, and there are three state-rooms here (those on the left side) which you may have. Your meals will be served at the usual times. As to your coming on deck, that cannot be allowed until we are in the Atlantic, unless Dr. van Mildart sees fit to permit you to come up one at a time after dark has fallen."

"All of which means that you intend to hold us prisoners," said Goulburn.

The man bowed.

"You are prisoners at your own pleasure—with the exception of Miss Lamotte. Either you, Lord Maxton, or you, Mr. Goulburn, can release yourselves and your wives by complying with Dr. van Mildart's terms."

"And suppose we did?" asked Lord Maxton.

"In that case you will be placed in a position from whence you can quickly regain your liberty. You have only to comply."

"Well—and suppose we don't?" inquired Lord Maxton.

The supposed Vanderkiste shrugged his shoulders.

"But you will," he said, and went away again as abruptly as he had come.

The day wore on without adventure. The ladies examined the cabins allotted to them, and found them as comfortable as the saloon; the two men smoked, chatted, and stared out of the port-holes at the dancing sea, through which they were speeding so rapidly. Lunch was duly served to them, on just as generous a scale as breakfast; tea was brought at five o'clock, a perfectly cooked dinner at eight. But the monotony was as great as the confinement was wearing, and Lord Maxton began to fume and fret and to utter savage threats against his jailer. Since his disappearance in the morning they had seen nothing of van Mildart—except the white-liveried niggers, no one had been near them since

the pseudo-Vanderkiste came to tell them of the arrangements for their accommodation.

"Expect we shall have to make some bargain with the fellow!" growled the Earl after dinner, as he smoked furiously at a large pipe by an open port-hole. "He's got the whip hand of us, begad!"

"I suppose we shall!" sighed Goulburn. "No one knows what such a desperate man as van Mildart would do."

"Pity we can't swag the fellow—break his blessed back, or something comforting of that sort!" said Lord Maxton. "How would it be to bargain with him? We're fairly had, yah know."

Miss Lamotte, who had been very quiet during dinner, interposed.

"Wait a little—wait until morning," she said. "Let me have a talk with him to-night, and see what I can do."

"If anybody can do anything with Dr. van Mildart, Miss Lamotte can," remarked Lady Maxton. "Do, Miss Lamotte, see him, and try to get him to hear reason! Of course, we know quite well that he is a very clever man, but surely it isn't fair to be always kidnapping people and stealing their diamonds and their money—and besides, he wants such a lot! Perhaps I wouldn't have minded giving him a few of my diamonds, and I'm sure that Freddie would have written him a cheque, if it had been necessary; but when it comes to asking for all my diamonds——"

"Asking, begad!" ejaculated Lord Maxton. "Taking,

you mean, and without so much as a 'By your leave,' begad! Man's mad, I think."

Goulburn, who had been talking quietly to his wife at a little distance, caught Lord Maxton's last words.

"That's just what Moira and I have been talking about," he said. "We believe he is mad."

Lord Maxton whistled.

"The deuce you do! Monstrous nasty thing, now, you know, to be fastened up in a ship with a madman. What do you think, now, Miss Lamotte?"

Miss Lamotte shook her head.

"I don't know what to say," she replied. "He may be, and probably is, suffering from some form of mania—witness his craving to amass wealth by robbing others; and he certainly lets nothing stand in his way, and is utterly callous to pain and suffering. Mad—yes, very likely he is mad—there are so many degrees of madness. But I will see him—if he will see me."

She rang a bell. One of the white-coated niggers answered it. She sent a message to van Mildart. Might she see him?—on behalf of herself and the others?

When the nigger had gone away to deliver this message Miss Lamotte passed into the cabin which had been set apart for her. She closed and fastened the door, and turning up the electric light, drew a curtain over the port-hole. And for a moment she stood in apparent irresolution in the centre of the room. Had any one been watching her, he would have thought that she was trying to make up her mind about something, and that she found it difficult to do it. But she suddenly

made a short, sharp exclamation, and a look of determination came into her eyes and shaped itself about her mouth.

"It's the only thing to do," she said, whispering the words to herself. "And it's as merciful to him as to the rest of us. He'd leave me on that island if he had the chance. I'll do it!"

Then Miss Lamotte did what an onlooker would have thought a strange thing. Unloosing the bosom of her gown, she drew from some secret receptacle a small bag of chamois leather which was evidently attached to her neck by a thin gold chain. From this receptacle she produced what was obviously a ring-case, covered in thick scarlet morocco, somewhat the worse for wear. She snapped this open, and revealed a massive gold ring of curious design, which was set about all round its circle with what appeared to be diamonds, all of them cut in an unusual fashion and tapering to very sharp points. Miss Lamotte picked this ring out of its case with scrupulous care and fitted it on the first finger of her right hand with equal attention. Then she put the case back in the chamois-leather bag, and replaced the bag in its hiding-place, and having turned out her electric light, went to join her fellow-prisoners. And she had only just taken her place amongst them when the nigger envoy returned and motioned her, with formal politeness but in silence, to follow him. She went away. Lady Maxton gave her an imploring glance as she passed, and Moira looked at her wonderingly.

Van Mildart's cabin was at the end of a passage-

way opening out of the saloon—a spacious apartment which filled the width of the stern, as the captain's cabins in the old men-of-war did. He sat at a desk in its midst, a mass of papers before him and around him, and he scarcely took any notice when his ex-assistant entered the room, except to point to a chair. Miss Lamotte sat down. Van Mildart continued his work, whatever it was. Some moments went by—at last he half-looked up, half-glanced at her.

“Well?” he said. “You have of course come to say that the rest comply with my demands, and that you yourself ask for mercy.”

“Not quite that,” replied Miss Lamotte.

Van Mildart uttered an impatient exclamation. He spread out his hands. Looking at the papers loosely strewn about the desk, she saw that they were covered with what seemed to be architectural drawings, specifications, diagrams, and the like. Other sheets were filled with row upon row of figures; others with geometrical designs. And here and there on the sides of the cabin were great sheets of paper, brown, white, grey, with pictures of vast buildings—palaces, museums, galleries: all on a grand scale.

“I am far too much occupied to be troubled with opposition—which is, of course, futile,” said van Mildart. “If Maxton and Goulburn do not pay over the money I demand I will make them do so—the means are at hand. I cannot brook any interference—I have much to do. Since it really does not matter what you, personally, know or do not know, I have no objection

to telling you that I am founding a model city in the centre of what I intend to make a model kingdom. It will be formed out of the money paid by the people whom I am entitled to exact ransom from. I have already amassed enormous amounts—Maxton's money, Goulburn's money will help. It is a pity that you are not a rich woman—a great pity!"

"Why?" she asked.

"In that case you could have paid ransom: as it is, you will be eaten by the crabs. It is a fitting fate for a traitress."

"To be starved, sleepless, and—eventually—eaten by crabs?"

"Certainly. I once spent one night on that island myself, after being shipwrecked just off it. I was nearly mad within a couple of hours—I wonder how long you will hold out? But the crabs will eat you."

Miss Lamotte's chair was close to van Mildart's desk, and while they had been talking she had quietly edged it nearer and nearer. Now she suddenly leaned forward and seized his wrist with her right hand, gazing at him with a hard, fixed look.

"You don't mean to say that you, a man, will leave a woman to a death like that!" she exclaimed, gripping his wrist fiercely.

Van Mildart uttered a sharp cry of pain and drew his hand out of her grasp. He turned his wrist over—a slight red scratch showed itself just over the delicate tracery of the veins.

"You have scratched my wrist with one of your

rings," he said, as pettishly as a child might have complained of a pin-prick. "There must be a jagged point there—why do you not have it filed down?"

"I am sorry," said Miss Lamotte, fingering her rings. "I will attend to it. But—answer my question."

Van Mildart shook his head.

"I am incapable of pity," he said. "I was so sinned against by men and women in other days that my delight in life is to prey upon them now that I have the power. I want nothing of those people outside but their money. When I have got that they may go—where they like. With you, however, the case is different. You belong to a class with which I, of course, can never be at peace. Very fortunately, the place to which I am retiring after this final coup, which will add half a million to my resources, is inaccessible to even detectives. I may carry you there, but it will not be pleasant for you. The crabs might be preferable. No, you must suffer for your treachery. I never forgive."

Miss Lamotte rose and approached the door. With her hand upon it she turned and looked narrowly at van Mildart.

"Very good," she said. "Nor do I."

Then she went out and closed the door behind her.

The four expectant ones in the saloon looked anxiously at Miss Lamotte as she rejoined them, and Lady Maxton made haste to question her.

"Oh, Miss Lamotte, what does that awful man say?"

Miss Lamotte placed the tips of her fingers on the

table at which they were all sitting; and bending forward, spoke in a low voice.

"I don't think there is any doubt that van Mildart is quite mad," she said. "It will be best to leave him alone just now, and to await developments. We can't do anything else."

She passed on into her own cabin and once more exercised the same precaution of closing and locking the door. But this time, instead of drawing the curtain across the port-hole, she threw the curtain open and let the salt air flow into the cabin. Then with infinite precaution she drew the curious-looking ring from her finger and dropped it from the port-hole into the swirling waves through which the *Sparrow-Hawk* was still ploughing her way at racing speed.

Left alone, van Mildart began to shuffle about amongst his papers. His desk was piled high with them; close by there were sheaves and stacks of them on a side table. Not finding something that he wanted on his desk, he rose and sought for it on the table. And as he walked across the floor of his cabin he yawned heavily . . . and stumbled forward a little. He shook his head, as if to shake something out of it.

"Strange!" he said. "I am suddenly very sleepy . . . heavy with sleep . . ."

There was a broad settee running round the stern end of the semicircular cabin, and on this van Mildart sank down. His head fell against the cushions behind him; his right arm, limp, inert, dropped by his

side. He seemed to fade instantly and quietly into a profound slumber, and his body became absolutely motionless.

Lord Maxton was a heavy sleeper, especially at sea, and he was as sound asleep as usual when a heavy knocking somewhere close to his aggrieved ears roused him out of his berth. Then he was aware that the grey light was stealing into the cabin and that the *Sparrow-Hawk* was rolling somewhat freely. Also he realised that in addition to the knocking there was some commotion going on in the saloon. He hurried some clothing on, opened the door, and looked out. And there he saw the men who posed as Vanderkiste and Kelsey, both obviously upset and perturbed, knocking at Miss Lamotte's door.

"What's the row?" demanded Lord Maxton.

"We want Miss Lamotte," said the pseudo-Vanderkiste. "There's something wrong with Dr. van Mildart. Isn't Miss Lamotte a doctor?"

At that moment Miss Lamotte opened her door and emerged—fully dressed.

"I answered you twice, but you were making such a noise that you didn't hear me," she said. "What is it?"

"You're a doctor by profession, aren't you?" said one of them. "Come to van Mildart's cabin; we can't get an answer from him, but we've seen him through the ventilator, and he's sitting in a very odd attitude on his settee, in his clothes, and looks queer. He looks—dead."

Miss Lamotte followed them in silence to the door, which had never been opened since she herself closed it the night before. She climbed the chair which enabled her to look through the ventilator. One glance and she got down again.

"Force the door open," she said.

There was quite a small group around the door when the carpenter finally broke it open. Miss Lamotte entered the cabin first. She walked up to the curious still figure and bent over it for an instant, and then turned to the astonished faces behind her and spoke two words.

"Heart failure!" said Miss Lamotte.

When gentlemen like Dr. van Mildart die suddenly they throw many men and things into confusion. On its becoming known that the master mind, the controlling hand which had kept a grip of iron on them, was no more, the officers and crew of the *Sparrow-Hawk* became desperadoes of the worst type. They began to hunt for the treasure which van Mildart was believed to have on board—and found nothing. There was not a trace of any diamonds—either Lady Maxton's or anybody else's. There was sufficient money in gold and silver to satisfy the crew for a four-weeks' voyage, but the whereabouts of van Mildart's riches had died a secret with him. And now that none of them saw any chance of participating in the spoil, nor of sharing in the glories of the *El Dorada* to which the dead man was conducting them, there was bad trouble.

It was here that the hereditary genius for diplomacy

which was naturally born in the Earl of Maxton showed itself. One of his little eccentricities—consequent upon his being a very rich man—was to carry a considerable amount of ready money, in bank-notes, upon his yacht, in case, he said, of contingencies. This was a contingency. Summoning officers and crew, he promised, on his word as a belted earl, to give them ten thousand pounds, cash down, if they would turn back and meet the *Lorelei*. He would leave his wife and their friends as hostages while the money was fetched from one yacht to the other—no, better still, he would be a hostage himself, and Miss Lamotte should fetch the money.

Officers and crew accepted this offer with acclamation. After all, ten thousand pounds is ten thousand pounds. So before nightfall the captives once more became free people, and the *Lorelei* was turned homewards. The Countess of Maxton went wondering wherever van Mildart put her diamonds. But only Miss Lamotte knew how van Mildart's career came to this sudden close.

THE END



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